

# Mapping the Gap: Between the Promise and Reality of the Security Council's Protection Agenda



Security Council members observe a moment of silence for the victims of the 2003 bombing of the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI).  
Credit: UN Photo/Mark Garten

## Executive Summary

Over 25 years since the Security Council adopted resolution 1265 in 1999, establishing the protection of civilians (PoC) as a distinct agenda item, the long-observed gap between the protection framework that it has built and the reality experienced by civilians in armed conflict has never been wider. The Council has at its disposal well-established legal standards, operational tools, and reporting mechanisms developed through a substantial body of thematic and country-specific decisions. What it increasingly lacks is the political will and cohesion to apply them in

the situations where they are most urgently needed. As civilian harm in armed conflict surges, the credibility of the Council's protection framework—and its role in maintaining international peace and security—will be judged not by the norms it articulates but by its willingness to act on them.

This report—Security Council Report's (SCR) first thematic research report on PoC since 2015—assesses the Council's civilian protection efforts at this moment of acute geopolitical polarisation and proliferating civilian harm. It draws on SCR reporting,

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# Executive Summary

1	<b>Executive Summary</b>
2	Key Findings
2	Recommendations
3	<b>I. Introduction</b>
5	<b>II. Normative Background and Institutional Development (1999 – 2019)</b>
8	<b>III. Recent Trends &amp; Challenges (2020 – present)</b>
8	i. The Global Context
9	ii. The Security Council Context
12	ii.a. Accountability
14	ii.b. Humanitarian Access
17	ii.c. Peace Operations
21	ii.d. Cross-Cutting Threats
30	<b>IV. Recommendations</b>
30	i. Accountability
31	ii. Monitoring & Reporting
32	iii. Humanitarian Access
33	iv. Peace Operations
34	v. Cross-Cutting Threats
35	<b>V. Conclusion</b>

analysis of Council products, and interviews with UN officials, diplomats, and civil society actors. After first examining the evolution of the agenda’s institutional and normative framework over its first two decades, the report analyses recent trends and challenges since 2020, documenting an increase in armed conflicts worldwide and in violations of international humanitarian law—sometimes committed or supported by Council members themselves—which have contributed to deepening patterns of civilian harm. At the same time, the Council’s responses have steadily declined in frequency and scope, while the decisions that it does reach are increasingly contested or ignored by conflict parties.

The picture that emerges is of a PoC agenda that is no longer supported by the political foundations required to realise its ambition. The framework was constructed in the more permissive geopolitical environment of the post–Cold War period, during which mass atrocities in the Balkans, Rwanda, and elsewhere prompted the Council to elaborate a holistic paradigm to ensure civilian protection through accountability measures, humanitarian access, peacekeeping mandates, and a range of monitoring and reporting tools, growing into what the Council itself described in both 2015 and 2018 as “one of the core issues on its agenda”.<sup>1</sup> Yet even as that framework was being affirmed, the geopolitical conditions underpinning it were beginning to erode—a shift that has now come to limit the Council’s scope for action across core protective functions.

## Key Findings

- **Accountability practice has contracted to near-paralysis.** The Council’s accountability tools have shifted from coercive legal enforcement, hybrid courts, judicial referrals, and investigative mechanisms to a near-total reliance on sanctions—which are only sporadically and inconsistently operationalised for protection purposes. Meanwhile, references to international accountability mechanisms are increasingly contested in Council products, reinforcing a culture of impunity.
- **Humanitarian access has become politicised and instrumentalised.** Strong normative commitments and legal obligations persist, but fundamental

disagreements over sovereignty and consent have made it increasingly difficult for the Council to insulate principled aid delivery from political and military pressures. The collapse of the Syria cross-border mechanism and the displacement of the established aid architecture in Gaza illustrate how access arrangements themselves have become objects of geopolitical dispute.

- **The operational protection footprint is contracting under political pressure.** A series of peacekeeping terminations and drawdowns since 2020—in Darfur/Sudan, Mali, Lebanon, and elsewhere—is shrinking the UN’s protective presence even as civilian harm worsens. These transitions have been driven less by improved conditions on the ground than by the withdrawal of host-state consent and the priorities of specific Council members. Imposed budgetary pressures are constraining the ability of remaining operations to implement their PoC mandates, while growing reliance on non-UN deployments raises unresolved questions about PoC objectives, standards, and accountability.
- **Cross-cutting threats outpace the Council’s conceptual scaffolding.** Urban warfare and explosive weapons in populated areas, conflict-induced food insecurity, climate-related security risks, and new technologies—including autonomous weapons, uncrewed aerial systems, and the digital spread of harmful information—have intensified civilian harm in interconnected and mutually reinforcing ways. Unlike the more established areas of the PoC agenda, the Council has struggled to develop even the agreed frameworks that enforcement would require in several of these domains.

## Recommendations

The report proposes 20 recommendations to address two distinct challenges: a Council that possesses sophisticated PoC tools yet lacks the political will and cohesion to apply them, and a Council that, in certain areas, has been unable to build the normative basis necessary for effective enforcement. The proposals cluster around five themes:

- **Mobilising shared political commitments on accountability,** including a voluntary statement of pledges among Council

Security Council Report would like to thank the government of Austria for its generous support of this project. We also express our gratitude to all colleagues who generously shared their perspectives on the topics and issues covered in this report.

<sup>1</sup> Statement by the President of the Security Council (25 November 2015) (S/PRST/2015/23); Statement by the President of the Security Council (21 September 2018) (S/PRST/2018/18).

## Executive Summary

members; more consistent operationalisation of PoC-related designation criteria in sanctions regimes; and deepened engagement with the International Criminal Court and other international accountability mechanisms.

- **Rebalancing the reporting burden toward member-state implementation**, through compliance reporting modelled on the Council’s counterterrorism practice; voluntary IHL implementation reports; a broader role for the Informal Expert Group on PoC as a forum for implementation dialogue; and expanded use of the Security Council’s aide-mémoire on PoC to track the implementation of relevant recommendations issued by the Secretary-General.
- **Ensuring principled, safe, and unimpeded humanitarian access**, by reaffirming the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence as the basis for humanitarian aid in all situations; fully operationalising resolution 2730 on the protection of humanitarian and UN personnel in armed conflict; leveraging the tenth anniversary of resolution 2286 to reinforce legal obligations for the protection of medical care in armed conflict; and extending the cross-cutting humanitarian carve-out established by resolution 2664 to counterterrorism contexts.
- **Preserving and adapting the role of UN peace operations in protection**, by affirming PoC as a core aim across the full continuum of peace operations; prioritising mandated protection tasks in the use of available capacity and resources; resisting politically driven

drawdowns and consistently applying resolution 2594 to guide UN transitions; and embedding enforceable PoC requirements in all non-UN deployments authorised by the Council.

- **Strengthening frameworks for cross-cutting threats**, by adopting thematic products on urban warfare and conflict-induced displacement; improving early warning and early action on conflict and hunger; systematically integrating climate-related risk into country-specific PoC assessments; and pursuing a more proactive approach to the PoC-related implications of new technologies.

The report acknowledges that these recommendations are addressed to Council members operating under severe constraints. Some are achievable in the near term; others require a political environment that does not currently exist. What the report does argue is that the response to the current environment cannot be resignation. The Council has tools it is not using, norms it is not upholding, laws it is not enforcing, and reporting it is not heeding. The gap between what the Council has agreed and what it does is itself a political choice—and one that can, incrementally, be made differently. Two-and-a-half decades after the adoption of resolution 1265, the civilians bearing the consequences of that gap deserve the full weight of the Council’s attention and the most creative use of the political potential it retains as the body entrusted with primary responsibility for international peace and security.

## I. Introduction

In a briefing at a Security Council meeting addressing cross-cutting humanitarian issues, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs described the evolving nature of contemporary armed conflicts. He noted that they are increasingly intrastate in character, fought in urban environments, and waged by parties who blur the line between combatants and non-combatants. These trends, he said, had resulted in patterns of widespread civilian harm that are “no longer inevitable by-products or collateral damages of war” but rather “the means to achieve a strategic goal”. Contrasting this shift with a robust and growing body of international humanitarian law, human rights law, and refugee law, the briefer claimed that the “gulf between existing international norms and respect for them on the ground has probably never been so wide”. He further observed a growing “reluctance” in the Council to deploy UN peace operations; the use of mass media to spread hate speech in conflict settings; and an “atrocious” casualty rate among humanitarian personnel, for which impunity was the norm. Despite these concerning developments, he noted that the UN had reduced its consolidated humanitarian appeal by one third that year, which he described as “an expression of our realism” in the current international environment.

These remarks were delivered by Under-Secretary-General Sergio Vieira de Mello at a Council meeting held on 21 January 1999.<sup>2</sup> Three weeks later, the Council adopted a presidential statement that

was its first thematic decision on the protection of civilians (PoC) in armed conflict, expressing concern about “the widening gap between the rules of international humanitarian law and their application”.<sup>3</sup> In September of that year, the Council adopted resolution 1265, the first stand-alone resolution on PoC, which introduced the issue as a distinct item on the Council’s agenda and similarly expressed the body’s “deep concern at the erosion in respect for international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law and principles during armed conflict”.<sup>4</sup>

Marking the tenth anniversary of resolution 1265 in 2009, the Council unanimously adopted resolution 1894, which Austria—the text’s author—said was intended to “address existing gaps” in the UN’s protection work.<sup>5</sup> In a briefing following that adoption, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes welcomed the resolution as an “important advance” in the Council’s commitment to protect civilians but stated that the international community still had “far to go...in closing the gap between the rhetoric of internationally agreed laws for the protection of civilians and the reality of widespread non-compliance with those laws”.<sup>6</sup>

For the 20th anniversary of the PoC agenda in 2019, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) published a policy paper that lamented the “gaping disparities between the quality of protection provided by the existing normative framework and

2 UNSC 3968th Meeting Record (21 January 1999) (S/PV.3968).

3 Statement by the President of the Security Council (12 February 1999) (S/PRST/1999/6).

4 UNSC Resolution 1265 (17 September 1999) (S/RES/1265).

5 UNSC 6216th Meeting Record (11 November 2009) (S/PV.6216).

6 Ibid.

# I. Introduction

the actual protection of civilians on the ground”.<sup>7</sup> Marking the 25th anniversary in 2024, OCHA published a follow-up policy brief that reviewed subsequent developments and found that “the existing gap between the growing normative framework and the realities experienced by civilians in conflict-affected contexts across the world has remained, if not widened, in the past five years”.<sup>8</sup>

The rhetorical continuity in these descriptions of the state of civilian protection and the efficacy of the Council’s PoC engagement is striking, calling attention to both similarities and differences between the circumstances in which PoC first entered the Council’s agenda in 1999 and its current climate. On the one hand, it is evident from the above quotations that certain patterns of armed conflict, civilian harm, and non-compliance with international law that are the subject of widespread concern today were already evident three decades ago, spurring the Council to belatedly deepen its engagement with PoC as a thematic issue following mass atrocities against civilians in Rwanda, the Balkans, and elsewhere. Additionally, both geopolitical periods can be characterised as moments of global rupture:<sup>9</sup> the 1990s witnessed a rapid shift from the bipolar international system of the Cold War to the unipolar age of American dominance, while the current system is shifting towards a multipolar configuration with the rise of other global powers.

Yet in other ways there are obvious differences between the two eras. In 1999, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported 20 armed conflicts globally<sup>10</sup> and estimated that between 35 and 64 percent of conflict casualties were civilians.<sup>11</sup> By the 25th anniversary of resolution 1265 in 2024, the ICRC counted over 120 armed conflicts worldwide, while civilians accounted for 95 percent of casualties in incidents involving the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA)<sup>12</sup>—the leading cause of the more than 36,000 civilian deaths that the Secretary-General’s annual PoC report recorded that year.<sup>13</sup> That total was an increase from the 33,443 civilian deaths recorded in 2023, which already represented a staggering 72 percent rise from 2022, mainly due to the war in Gaza.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the two respective moments of systemic change have had contrasting impacts on Security Council dynamics. The end of the Cold War eased geopolitical tensions, fostering a more consensual

Council with greater scope for action: between 1990 and 1999, the annual number of resolutions adopted by the Council rose from 37 to 65, and the share of unanimous votes increased from 76 to 86 percent. By 2024, the reemergence of great power rivalry had again stymied Council action: the body adopted 46 resolutions that year—the lowest number since 1991—and only 65 percent of those decisions were unanimous. Last year, those figures had further decreased to 44 and 61 percent, respectively.

This contemporary gridlock has occurred alongside and been partly exacerbated by a succession of global and regional shocks with catastrophic impacts on civilians. These include the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic; the outbreak or intensification of devastating armed conflicts in Ethiopia, Gaza, Iran, Lebanon, Myanmar, Sudan, and Ukraine, among other contexts; and drastic humanitarian funding cuts “without historic precedent”,<sup>15</sup> as the UN itself risks “imminent financial collapse”.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the effects of climate change have compounded, serving as a “threat multiplier” in fragile contexts worldwide;<sup>17</sup> social media have accelerated the spread of harmful information in conflict situations, largely surpassing the radio-transmitted propaganda that had alarmed Vieira de Mello;<sup>18</sup> new weapon technologies such as uncrewed aerial systems (UAS) terrorise civilian populations, offering a “vision of a postapocalyptic future”;<sup>19</sup> and conflict parties have begun employing artificial intelligence (AI) in lethal military operations,<sup>20</sup> raising urgent legal questions about human oversight, attribution, and accountability.<sup>21</sup> It is against this backdrop that the UN’s 2026 Global Humanitarian Overview warned that the world is at a “breaking point”, marked by entrenched conflicts that are both more violent against civilians and longer-lasting than at any time since World War II,<sup>22</sup> thereby tempering any further comparisons between current protection dynamics and the Council’s early PoC engagement.

This report is intended to offer an assessment of the Council’s civilian protection efforts at this moment of global upheaval. Following this introductory chapter, it will proceed in four parts. Chapter II will explain the normative background informing the Council’s PoC agenda and detail its institutional development through its first two decades from 1999 to 2019. Chapter III will analyse more recent

7 OCHA (May 2019). Building a Culture of Protection: 20 Years of Security Council Engagement on the Protection of Civilians, p.66, <<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/building-culture-protection-20-years-security-council-engagement-protection-civilians>>.

8 OCHA (October 2023). Policy Brief on the Security Council’s Consideration of the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (2019–2023), p.23, <<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/policy-brief-security-councils-consideration-protection-civilians-armed-conflict-2019-2023>>.

9 Special Address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada (20 January 2026). World Economic Forum 2026 Annual Meeting, Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, <<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>>.

10 UNSC 3977th Meeting Record (12 February 1999) (S/PV.3977).

11 ICRC (1999). Arms Availability and the Situation of Civilians in Armed Conflict: A Study Presented by the ICRC, p.4, <[https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/other/icrc\\_002\\_0734\\_arms\\_availability.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0734_arms_availability.pdf)>.

12 Action on Armed Violence (21 May 2025). “Explosive Violence Monitor: 2024”, <<https://aoav.org.uk/2025/explosive-violence-monitor-2024/>>.

13 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (15 May 2025) (S/2025/271), [4].

14 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (14 May 2024) (S/2024/385), [6].

15 OCHA (8 December 2025). “Foreword by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Tom Fletcher”, Global Humanitarian Overview 2026, <<https://humanitarianaction.info/document/global-humanitarian-overview-2026/article/foreword-emergency-relief-coordinator-5>>.

16 “Guterres Warns UN Faces ‘Imminent Financial Collapse’” (30 January 2026). Al Jazeera, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/30/guterres-warns-un-faces-imminent-financial-collapse>>.

17 “Climate Change Recognized as ‘Threat Multiplier’, UN Security Council Debates its Impact on Peace” (25 January 2019). UN News, <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/01/1031322>>.

18 Bailey Ulbricht and Joelle Rizk (2024). “How Harmful Information on Social Media Impacts People Affected by Armed Conflict: A Typology of Harms”, International Review of the Red Cross, 106(926), p.823–862, <<https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/how-harmful-information-on-social-media-impacts-people-affected-by-armed-conflict-926>>.

19 Andrew E. Kramer (28 January 2026). “In Kherson, Ukraine, Every Step Outside Risks Death by Drone”. The New York Times, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/28/world/europe/kherson-ukraine-drones-russia.html>>.

20 See e.g. Tara Copp, Elizabeth Dwozkin and Ian Duncan (4 March 2026). “Pentagon Leverages AI in Iran Strikes Amid Feud with Anthropic”. The Washington Post, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2026/03/04/anthropic-ai-iran-campaign/>>; Sheera Frenkel and Natan Odenheimer (25 April 2025). “Israel’s A.I. Experiments in Gaza War Raise Ethical Concerns”. The New York Times, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/25/technology/israel-gaza-ai.html>>; C.J. Chivers (31 December 2025). “In Ukraine, an Arsenal of Killer A.I. Drones Is Being Born in War Against Russia”. The New York Times, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/31/magazine/ukraine-ai-drones-war-russia.html>>.

21 UNODA. “Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems”, <<https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/emerging-challenges/lethal-autonomous-weapon-systems>>

22 OCHA (8 December 2025). “Trends in Crises and Needs: A World at Breaking Point”, Global Humanitarian Overview 2026, <<https://humanitarianaction.info/document/global-humanitarian-overview-2026/article/trends-crises-and-needs-world-breaking-point>>.

## I. Introduction

trends from 2020 onwards, drawing on SCR reporting, analysis of Council products, and interviews with UN officials, diplomats, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)—conducted in a semi-structured format on the condition of non-attribution—to identify

current gaps and shortcomings in the Council’s PoC practice. Chapter IV will make recommendations to address some of these challenges. Finally, Chapter V will offer concluding observations.

## II. Normative Background and Institutional Development (1999 – 2019)

As noted above, the Security Council first addressed PoC as a distinct thematic agenda item in 1999. This engagement emerged after a period in which the international community had witnessed a series of particularly violent events around the world in which civilians had suffered disproportionately and where there was at the time considerable Council involvement. This led to increased international awareness of the need to strengthen the protection of civilians caught in armed conflict and growing recognition of the role that the Council should play in such efforts. Several country-specific resolutions that the Council adopted in the 1990s—including on Iraq (1991),<sup>23</sup> Bosnia (1994),<sup>24</sup> and Rwanda (1994),<sup>25</sup> among other situations—affirmed that violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) could constitute a threat to international peace and security, thus linking civilian protection directly to the Council’s mandate under the UN Charter.

This framing facilitated the emergence of a distinct protection agenda shaping Council efforts to alleviate civilian harm across country-specific situations. The intention was not to generate novel legal obligations but rather to more systematically operationalise within the Council universally accepted rules of IHL, as well as international human rights law (IHRL) and international refugee law (IRL). These provisions were set out in a range of international legal instruments, including:

- the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, in particular the Fourth Convention, and the 1977 Additional Protocol I relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts and Additional Protocol II relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts;
- the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Optional Protocol;
- the 1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment;
- the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography;
- the 1994 Convention on the Safety of UN and Associated Personnel;

- the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC); and
- customary IHL.

Drawing on such sources, the Secretary-General first articulated PoC as a separate conceptual thematic issue for Council consideration through two reports submitted in 1998: one on the causes of conflict and promotion of peace in Africa<sup>26</sup> and one on the protection of humanitarian assistance to refugees and others.<sup>27</sup>

The Council subsequently sharpened and formalised the contours of the PoC agenda relatively swiftly through a series of products over the following year. Its first thematic decision on PoC was the presidential statement of 12 February 1999, which condemned attacks against civilians, called for respect for IHL, and expressed the Council’s willingness to respond to situations in which civilians had been targeted by combatants.<sup>28</sup> The text also requested a report from the Secretary-General with recommendations for the Council’s future PoC-related work. This landmark report, containing 40 recommendations, was issued on 8 September of the same year.<sup>29</sup>

Nine days later, the Council adopted resolution 1265 of 17 September 1999 as its first thematic resolution on PoC, formally establishing the issue as an item on its agenda.<sup>30</sup> Similar to the presidential statement, the text condemned the deliberate targeting of civilians in conflict; urged conflict parties to respect IHL; stressed the importance of safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid; and expressed the Council’s willingness to take measures to ensure compliance and to provide protection through UN peace operations. It also emphasised the importance of conflict prevention and cooperation with regional and other organisations.

One month after this adoption, the Council operationalised the nascent PoC agenda in a country-specific context by adopting resolution 1270 of 22 October 1999, which established the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) as the first peacekeeping operation (PKO) with an explicit Chapter VII mandate to protect civilians. Specifically, the mission was instructed, “within its capabilities and areas of deployment, to afford protection to civilians under imminent threat of physical violence”.<sup>31</sup>

The Council continued to develop its approach to PoC in the years that followed, both at the thematic level and in country-specific contexts. The 2019 policy paper that OCHA published for the 20th anniversary of the PoC agenda reviewed the evolution of the Council’s

23 UNSC Resolution 688 (5 April 1991) (S/RES/688).

24 UNSC Resolution 941 (23 September 1994) (S/RES/941).

25 UNSC Resolution 955 (8 November 1994) (S/RES/955).

26 Report of the Secretary-General on the Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa (13 April 1998) (A/52/871-S/1998/318).

27 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection for Humanitarian Assistance to Refugees and Others in Conflict Situations (22 September 1998) (S/1998/883).

28 Statement by the President of the Security Council (12 February 1999) (S/PRST/1999/6).

29 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (8 September 1999) (S/1999/957).

30 UNSC Resolution 1265 (17 September 1999) (S/RES/1265).

31 UNSC Resolution 1270 (22 October 1999) (S/RES/1270), [14].

## II. Normative Background and Institutional Development (1999 – 2019)

protection practices over the preceding two decades. It reaffirmed the enduring relevance of the main provisions of resolution 1265, which remained the agenda's "building blocks": enhancing compliance with applicable international law and relevant Council decisions in the conduct of hostilities; facilitating access to humanitarian assistance; protecting forcibly displaced persons, women, and children; providing protection through UN peace operations; and responding to violations through targeted measures and the promotion of accountability.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the paper also identified normative and institutional advancements, observing that the Council's more recent PoC engagement had centred on strengthening the agenda's architecture through the adoption of thematic resolutions on relevant sub-topics; integrating and mainstreaming protection concerns across country-specific resolutions; and developing monitoring and accountability tools to more effectively protect civilians on the ground.

A review of Council decisions during this time illustrates some of these trends. Between 2000 and 2009, the Council adopted three additional thematic resolutions on PoC. Resolution 1296 of 19 April 2000 built on resolution 1265 by reaffirming the centrality of IHL, condemning deliberate attacks against civilians and civilian objects, and emphasising the need for accountability, humanitarian access, and the protection of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), while also linking civilian protection more explicitly to peacekeeping mandates.<sup>33</sup> Resolution 1674 of 28 April 2006 marked a qualitative step forward by explicitly endorsing the responsibility of states to protect civilians from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, reaffirming the Council's readiness to take action where civilians are targeted, and calling for the systematic inclusion of protection provisions in peace operations and Council mandates.<sup>34</sup> Resolution 1894 of 11 November 2009 consolidated and operationalised this framework by focusing on compliance and implementation, urging improved monitoring and reporting on violations, stressing the protection of particularly vulnerable groups, and calling for concrete measures to enhance accountability, humanitarian access, and the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions in protecting civilians on the ground, including through mission resource allocation.<sup>35</sup>

The Council also developed the agenda's normative framework through the adoption of resolutions concerning the protection of specific groups. For instance, resolution 1502 of 26 August 2003 and resolution 2175 of 29 August 2014 reinforced protection obligations regarding humanitarian and UN personnel,<sup>36</sup> while resolution 1738 of 23 December 2006 and resolution 2222 of 27 May 2015 did the same with regard to the protection of journalists and other media professionals.<sup>37</sup> Additional examples include resolution 2286 of 3 May 2016 on healthcare workers and facilities in armed conflict; resolution 2474 of 11 June 2019 on missing persons in armed

conflict; and resolution 2475 of 20 June 2019 on persons with disabilities in armed conflict.<sup>38</sup>

Concurrently, the Council developed its country-specific approach to PoC, particularly in peacekeeping contexts, where it built on the mandate first given to UNAMSIL. In 2008, the Council renewed the mandate of the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (MONUC), which became the first mission mandated to prioritise protection above all other mandated tasks.<sup>39</sup> In 2013, the Council took a further step in the DRC when it for the first time explicitly mandated a peacekeeping mission to conduct offensive operations, authorising MONUC's successor mission—the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO)—to deploy "force intervention brigades" to "neutralize" and "disarm" the M23 rebel group.<sup>40</sup> These increasingly comprehensive PoC mandates also spurred innovations in the field, including the deployment of Joint Protection Teams composed of military, police, and civilian personnel; Community Liaison Assistants to strengthen communication between the mission and local communities; Specialized Police Teams in areas such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and community-oriented policing; and PoC Advisors to coordinate, monitor, and report on mission-wide protection efforts. On the policy level, the development of peacekeeping doctrine at UN Headquarters—as requested by resolution 1894 as well as the General Assembly's Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C34)—helped ensure coherence in these efforts by propagating a holistic and unified operational understanding of the PoC concept across all mission components.<sup>41</sup> By 2019, these efforts had mainstreamed protection as a highly institutionalised peacekeeping priority, with eight of the 14 active operations at the time mandated to protect civilians.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to peacekeeping, the Council also began employing sanctions as a tool to enforce its PoC-related decisions in country-specific situations. Listing criteria related to violations of IHL and abuses of IHRL were first introduced in the sanctions regime for Côte d'Ivoire in 2004 and became increasingly common thereafter. Proscribed behaviour typically included engaging in or providing support for acts that targeted civilians and/or constituted breaches of IHL or abuses of IHRL, such as killing and maiming, torture, abduction, and enforced disappearance. In some regimes, listing criteria also relate to the obstruction of humanitarian assistance, forced displacement, sexual violence, and the violation of special protections for women and children. By 2019, the same proportion applied to sanctions as to peacekeeping, with PoC-related listing criteria included in eight of the 14 then-active regimes.<sup>43</sup> In parallel, the unintended humanitarian consequences of certain sanction measures began drawing increasing attention and concern.<sup>44</sup>

32 OCHA (May 2019). Building a Culture of Protection: 20 Years of Security Council Engagement on the Protection of Civilians, p.62.

33 UNSC Resolution 1296 (19 April 2000) (S/RES/1296).

34 UNSC Resolution 1674 (28 April 2006) (S/RES/1674).

35 UNSC Resolution 1894 (11 November 2009) (S/RES/1894).

36 UNSC Resolution 1502 (26 August 2003) (S/RES/1502); UNSC Resolution 2175 (29 August 2014) (S/RES/2175).

37 UNSC Resolution 1738 (23 December 2006) (S/RES/1738); UNSC Resolution 2222 (27 May 2015) (S/RES/2222).

38 UNSC Resolution 2286 (3 May 2016) (S/RES/2286); UNSC Resolution 2474 (11 June 2019) (S/RES/2474); UNSC Resolution 2475 (20 June 2019) (S/RES/2475).

39 UNSC Resolution 1856 (22 December 2008) (S/RES/1856).

40 UNSC Resolution 2098 (28 March 2013) (S/RES/2098), [11(b)].

41 See e.g., UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations and UN Department of Field Support (2010), "Operational Concept on the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations".

42 These were UNISFA (Abyei), MINUSCA (CAR), MONUSCO (DRC), UNAMID (Darfur/Sudan), MINUJUSTH (Haiti), UNIFIL (Lebanon), MINUSMA (Mali), and UNMISS (South Sudan).

43 These were the regimes for the CAR, the DRC, Libya, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen.

44 See e.g., the Compendium of the High-level Review of United Nations Sanctions. Letter dated 12 June 2015 from the Permanent Representatives of Australia, Finland, Germany, Greece and Sweden to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (A/69/941-S/2015/432), in particular sections IX.A, VI.D, and VII.C.3.

## II. Normative Background and Institutional Development (1999 – 2019)

Alongside these field-related developments, the Council established a variety of internal tools to inform and improve its PoC-related decision-making. In 2002, it endorsed an aide-mémoire proposed by the Secretary-General to guide Council consideration of PoC issues in country-specific situations, in particular relating to peacekeeping mandates.<sup>45</sup> The document listed key objectives for Council action and specific questions for consideration in meeting those objectives. Subsequent editions issued since 2009 grew progressively more detailed and expansive, addressing PoC concerns in general rather than in the sole context of UN peace operations and including a thematically organised compilation of Council language used in prior resolutions based on good practice to serve as a reference guide for language previously adopted for certain situations and issues of concern. The sixth edition, issued in 2018, was the most recent one to be formally recognised by the Council in a presidential statement.<sup>46</sup>

Based on a recommendation from the Secretary-General in 2007,<sup>47</sup> the Council also created an Informal Expert Group (IEG) on PoC in January 2009. Chaired by the UK, this group met regularly at the working level and focused on the renewal of relevant peacekeeping mandates, receiving briefings by OCHA and mission personnel on key protection issues, helping to promote among Council members a shared understanding of PoC concerns in the drafting of country-specific resolutions.

Further, the Council through a variety of means—such as resolutions, presidential statements, or letters from its president—periodically requested and considered thematic PoC reports from the Secretary-General. Initially, the time intervals between them varied, ranging from 12 to 18 months, which did not always align with the Council’s practice of holding biannual open debates under the agenda item. In 2015, the Council adopted a presidential statement that regularised both the reporting and meeting cycles, requesting the Secretary-General to submit an annual PoC report to be formally considered by the Council within the same General Assembly session.<sup>48</sup> Since then, the Council has received the report in May of each year and considered it in an annual open debate held the same month.

The Council additionally established a range of more specialised reporting tools on particular sub-issues. These include the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on children and armed conflict (CAAC) and the Monitoring, Analysis and Reporting Arrangements (MARA) on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), which the Council successively mandated in 2005<sup>49</sup> and 2010<sup>50</sup> to provide timely and reliable information from the field on relevant violations—perpetrators of which the Secretary-General lists in the annexes to his annual CAAC and CRSV reports, respectively. Additionally,

resolution 2417 of 24 May 2018 on the link between conflict and food insecurity requested the Secretary-General to “report swiftly to the Council when the risk of conflict-induced famine and widespread food insecurity in armed conflict contexts occurs”.<sup>51</sup> Since then, OCHA has alerted the Council to risks of famine in conflict situations in numerous so-called “white notes”, which the Council has variously considered in open briefings, closed consultations, and informal interactive dialogues (IIDs).

Finally, the Council took or supported a variety of actions to promote accountability for PoC-related violations. Following the establishment of international tribunals for Rwanda and Yugoslavia in the 1990s, later measures included the creation of hybrid courts for Sierra Leone (2000) and Lebanon (2007); the referral of the situations in Darfur (2005) and Libya (2011) to the ICC; and the establishment of investigative mechanisms such as the International Commission of Inquiry for the Central African Republic (CAR) (2013) and the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/ISIL in Iraq (UNITAD) (2017). The Council has also promoted accountability by routinely mandating peace operations to support national justice systems, including in the DRC, Haiti, and South Sudan, among other contexts.

Ultimately, these trends in the evolution of the Council’s PoC-related practice—both thematically and in country-specific situations—reflect an expanded understanding of the concept itself. Early on, the agenda exhibited a relatively narrow focus on protecting civilians from immediate threats of physical violence, as reflected in UNAMSIL’s mandate in 1999. These efforts gradually grew into a more holistic PoC approach that is “understood as covering all measures aimed at limiting the effects of armed conflict on civilians... and is generally accepted to encompass ‘the broader spectrum of human security and human dignity’”.<sup>52</sup> This shift explains how the annual volume of PoC-related provisions within Council resolutions increased significantly from 1999 to 2019, even as the annual number of Council resolutions containing PoC-related language remained relatively stable during that time—an indication that the Council’s PoC engagement has grown less through the adoption of additional decisions and more through the progressive densification and elaboration of PoC obligations within resolutions.<sup>53</sup> It is against the backdrop of this normative expansion that the Council issued presidential statements in both 2015 and 2018 describing PoC as “one of the core issues on its agenda”.<sup>54</sup> Yet even as the Council was affirming this framework, the geopolitical conditions underpinning it had already begun to shift—a trend that the following chapter examines in depth.

45 Statement by the President of the Security Council (15 March 2002) (S/PRST/2002/6).

46 Statement by the President of the Security Council (21 September 2018) (S/PRST/2018/18).

47 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (28 October 2007) (S/2007/643).

48 Statement by the President of the Security Council (25 November 2015) (S/PRST/2015/23).

49 UNSC Resolution 1612 (26 July 2005) (S/RES/1612).

50 UNSC Resolution 1960 (16 December 2010) (S/RES/1960).

51 UNSC Resolution 2417 (24 May 2018) (S/RES/2417), [12].

52 Sarah Adamczyk (May 2019). Twenty Years of Protection of Civilians at the UN Security Council (Policy Brief 74). Humanitarian Policy Group, p.3, <<https://media.odi.org/documents/12709.pdf>>.

53 UN Security Council Affairs Division. “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Dashboard”, <<https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/repertoire/research-tools/protection-civilians-armed-conflict>>.

54 Statement by the President of the Security Council (25 November 2015) (S/PRST/2015/23); Statement by the President of the Security Council (21 September 2018) (S/PRST/2018/18).

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

The beginning of this decade was marked by the catastrophic spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. In his 2020 annual report on PoC, submitted to the Security Council in May, the Secretary-General called the outbreak the “greatest test” that the UN had faced, highlighting its “severe impact on the protection of civilians, particularly in conflict contexts” and reiterating his appeal—first launched in March of that year—for an immediate global ceasefire to “help create conditions for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, open space for diplomacy and bring hope to those most vulnerable”.<sup>55</sup> The Security Council eventually supported this call through resolution 2532 of 1 July 2020, which demanded a cessation of hostilities in all situations on its agenda and called for all conflict parties to engage in a humanitarian pause for at least 90 days. The resolution took three months to negotiate—mainly due to disagreement between China and the US over references to the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>56</sup>—and was only sporadically and briefly heeded as violence and civilian harm persisted in conflict situations around the world.<sup>57</sup>

Although COVID-19 was a historically singular event, the Council’s response to it would prove symptomatic of the challenges that have continued to plague the body in its attempts to address this decade’s protection crises and discharge its responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Indeed, despite the commitment reaffirmed by all UN member states in the *Pact for the Future*—adopted by the General Assembly in September 2024—to take “concrete and practical measures to protect all civilians in armed conflict”,<sup>58</sup> the Council has increasingly become a battleground for rising geopolitical tensions that delay or prevent substantive action to this end, while conflict parties have continued to take advantage of those same tensions to routinely flout international law with impunity and ignore the decisions that the body does reach. These dynamics have further widened the long-observed gap between PoC’s legal framework and the state of civilian protection on the ground, characterising the Council’s engagement on many of the most destructive situations on its agenda as the overall number of active conflict situations around the world has reached record levels, civilian death tolls mount, and the annual number of Council decisions decreases year by year.

This chapter will explore these trends in further detail. It will first situate the Council’s current PoC engagement within the broader geopolitical context characterised by Council polarisation and gridlock, the proliferation of armed conflict, and deepening patterns of civilian harm. It will then examine how these conditions have affected Council approaches—both thematic and country-specific—to four PoC-related issue areas: accountability measures, humanitarian access, peacekeeping mandates, and a selection of

cross-cutting threats to civilians, including urban warfare, conflict-induced food insecurity, climate-related security risks, and new and emerging technologies.

#### i. The Global Context

As noted in the introductory chapter, structural changes to the international system over the past two decades have impacted states’ threat perception and strategic interests, fuelling competition, fragmentation, and violence. The global number of armed conflicts has risen dramatically, as non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) have become more entrenched and the number of international armed conflicts (IACs)—though still far fewer than NIACs—has also increased. The tendency of major powers to link disputes to their core interests has also become more pronounced, as they have inserted themselves both directly and indirectly in a growing number of conflicts worldwide. Alongside this instability, conflict parties have been emboldened to selectively apply—or in some cases completely ignore—international law governing the conduct of hostilities, exploiting multilateral gridlock and political patronage to avoid accountability for violations and thereby degrade international humanitarian norms and standards.

Some figures bear out these trends. In 2024—the most recent year for which there was complete data at the time of writing—the ICRC reported over 120 ongoing armed conflicts worldwide, involving over 60 states and 120 non-state armed groups. This tally represents a drastic increase over the past couple of decades, especially for NIACs, which have tripled from under 30 to around 100 since the year 2000.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) found that the number of countries hosting multiple simultaneous conflicts also increased in 2024, indicating “growing complexity in conflict dynamics with more actors involved”.<sup>60</sup> Predictably, these trends have also resulted in more fatalities: PRIO ranked 2024 as the fourth most violent year since 1989 in terms of battle deaths—surpassed only by the three years prior.

This increase in and evolution of armed conflict has had devastating impacts on civilians. According to the 2024 Civilian Protection Index published by the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)—which measures 15 indicators of direct and indirect civilian harm across 163 countries—the civilian protection environment has worsened in all monitored regions since 2020.<sup>61</sup> In 2019, the Secretary-General’s PoC report documented more than 20,000 civilian deaths and injuries in ten armed conflicts; in 2024, recorded deaths alone surpassed 36,000 across 14 armed conflicts.<sup>62</sup> The use of explosive weapons is responsible for a large share of this increase: Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) found that such weapons caused

55 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (6 May 2020) (S/2020/366), [1].

56 Security Council Report. “Security Council Resolution on COVID-19”. (What’s in Blue, 30 June 2020), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2020/06/security-council-resolution-on-covid-19.php>>.

57 See e.g. Oxfam International (24 September 2020). “Over 21,000 People Killed Since UN Global Ceasefire Resolution”, <<https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/over-21000-people-killed-un-global-ceasefire-resolution>>; “Despite Call for Global Ceasefire to Combat Pandemic, Deadly Conflicts Continue, Humanitarian Chief Tells Security Council Debate on Protecting Civilians” (25 May 2021). UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, <<https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14530.doc.htm>>.

58 UNGA Resolution 79/1, “Pact for the Future” (22 September 2024) (A/RES/79/1), [Action 14].

59 ICRC (16 April 2024). “How is the Term ‘Armed Conflict’ Defined in International Humanitarian Law?”, <<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-opinion-paper-how-term-armed-conflict-defined-international-humanitarian-law>>.

60 Siri Aas Rustad (2025). “Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024”. PRIO Paper, PRIO, <<https://www.prio.org/publications/14453>>.

61 Center for Civilians in Conflict (21 October 2025). “CIVIC’s 2024 Trends Report Finds Global Civilian Protection in Sharp Decline”, <<https://civiliansinconflict.org/press-releases/civics-2024-trends-report-finds-global-civilian-protection-in-sharp-decline/>>.

62 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (7 May 2019) (S/2019/373); Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (15 May 2025) S/2025/271. Using a different methodology, a longer-term comparison from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) found that civilian and “undetermined” conflict-related deaths steadily decreased from 41,559 in 2015 to 14,447 in 2021, and then more than tripled to 48,384 in 2024. See: OHCHR (18 June 2025). “UN Data Shows Surge in Civilian Deaths in Conflict Globally, Highlights Pervasive Discrimination”, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/06/un-data-shows-surge-civilian-deaths-conflict-globally-highlights-pervasive>>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

over 67,000 deaths or injuries in 2024, of which over 59,500 were civilians, representing a 69 percent increase in global explosive violence harm to civilians compared with 2023. When used in populated areas, explosive weapons had a particularly devastating impact, with a 95-percent civilian casualty rate. A significant proportion of this destruction occurred in Gaza, which was the site of nearly 40 percent of all civilian harm from explosive weapons globally.<sup>63</sup>

Other forms of civilian harm have also multiplied. In 2024, the UN recorded a 25 percent increase both in cases of CRSV<sup>64</sup> and grave violations against children<sup>65</sup> compared with 2023—a year in which the proportion of women and children killed had already doubled and tripled, respectively, from the year before.<sup>66</sup> 2024 was also the deadliest year on record for journalists,<sup>67</sup> humanitarian personnel,<sup>68</sup> and healthcare workers.<sup>69</sup> It saw record-high displacement numbers as well, with over 123.2 million people forcibly displaced by the end of 2024, an increase of six percent compared to the end of 2023, with children accounting for 40 percent of that total.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, more than 295 million people faced high levels of acute food insecurity worldwide—13.7 million more than in 2023 and the sixth consecutive annual increase—with conflict the primary driver for approximately half of that total, affecting nearly 140 million people across 20 countries and territories.<sup>71</sup> The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) declared conflict-induced famine in parts of Sudan in December 2024<sup>72</sup> and in parts of Gaza in August 2025,<sup>73</sup> marking the first time that the monitoring body detected two ongoing famines simultaneously.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, widespread attacks on civilian objects and critical civilian infrastructure have persisted, including in Gaza,<sup>75</sup> Iran,<sup>76</sup> Ukraine,<sup>77</sup> and across the Gulf region.<sup>78</sup>

Eroding respect for international law has fuelled these deepening patterns of civilian harm. As the Secretary-General's 2025 PoC report observed, violence targeting civilians in armed conflict reflects not only isolated IHL violations but a broader deterioration in compliance and respect for the law itself. Parties to conflict increasingly

rely on permissive interpretations of key principles such as distinction, proportionality, precautions, and detention standards to justify high levels of civilian harm, a tendency that has combined with politically selective applications of the law and the uneven pursuit of accountability to weaken the credibility of the normative framework.<sup>79</sup> The ICRC reached a similar conclusion in its 2024 report on IHL and contemporary armed conflict,<sup>80</sup> emphasising the structural and interpretive erosion of IHL through expansive targeting doctrines, reversals in disarmament commitments,<sup>81</sup> irresponsible arms transfers, and emerging technologies—including cyber operations and autonomous weapons—that strain the law's protective purpose. Both reports suggested that the central challenge lies less in gaps in the legal regime than in declining political will, good-faith application, and consistent enforcement needed to preserve IHL as an effective constraint on contemporary warfare.

The conduct of major powers, including the five permanent members (P5) of the Security Council, has accelerated this trend. Through their involvement in and approach to conflict situations ranging from Ukraine to Gaza to the wider Middle East, they have challenged core tenets of the rules-based international order that they have been tasked to uphold, including the general prohibition on the use of force and the rules governing its lawful application.<sup>82</sup> This has prompted accusations of double standards that have undermined the legitimacy of global governance, further constraining multilateral fora as effective tools of conflict resolution and civilian protection at a moment when they are urgently needed.

#### ii. The Security Council Context

The Security Council as an institution is both a source and a reflection of these trends. In 2025, the Council adopted 44 resolutions, marking the fifth consecutive year of declining output: the number has fallen steadily from 57 in 2021 to 54 in 2022, 50 in 2023, and 46 in 2024, reaching its lowest level since 1991, when 42 resolutions

63 Iain Overton and Niamh Gillen (2024). "Counting the Blasts: The Civilian Burden of Explosive Weapons in an Unrelenting Year", Protection of Civilians Trends Report: Center for Civilians in Conflict, <<https://www.civilianprotectiontrends.org/protect#anchor-9>>.

64 "UN Warns of Steep Rise in Sexual Violence During Conflict" (14 August 2025). UN News, <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165650>>.

65 Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict (17 June 2025) (A/79/878-S/2025/247).

66 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (14 May 2024) (S/2024/385).

67 Committee to Protect Journalists (12 February 2025). "2024 is Deadliest Year for Journalists in CPJ History; Almost 70% Killed by Israel", <<https://cpj.org/special-reports/2024-is-deadliest-year-for-journalists-in-cpj-history-almost-70-percent-killed-by-israel/>>.

68 OCHA (19 August 2025). "World Humanitarian Day: Attacks on Aid Workers Hit Another Record, Humanitarians Call for Urgent Action", <<https://www.unocha.org/news/world-humanitarian-day-attacks-aid-workers-hit-another-record-humanitarians-call-urgent-action>>.

69 Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition and Insecurity Insight (May 2025). Epidemic of Violence: Violence Against Health Care in Conflict 2024, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/epidemic-violence-against-health-care-conflict-2024>>.

70 UNHCR (June 2025). Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024, <<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2024>>.

71 Food Security Information Network and Global Network Against Food Crises (May 2025). 2025 Global Report on Food Crises, <<https://www.fightfoodcrises.net/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC2025-full.pdf>>.

72 IPC (24 December 2024). "Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation – Updated Projections and FRC Conclusions for October 2024 to May 2025", <<https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1159433/>>.

73 IPC (22 August 2025). "Gaza Strip: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for 1 July–15 August 2025 and Projection for 16 August–30 September 2025", <<https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1159696/>>.

74 Tania Karas (27 August 2025). "Devex Dish: Lessons from Twin Famines in Gaza and Sudan". Devex, <<https://www.devex.com/news/devex-dish-lessons-from-twin-famines-in-gaza-and-sudan-110723>>.

75 Benedict Garman and Matt Murphy (18 July 2025). "Israel Levelling Thousands of Gaza Civilian Buildings in Controlled Demolitions". BBC News, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-33fccfbc-abcc-4af1-bdd2-632b2787cf59>>.

76 Ghazal Golshiri and Madjid Zerrouky (11 March 2026). "Bombing of Civilian Infrastructure Aims to Bring Iran to Its Knees". Le Monde, <[https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2026/03/11/bombing-of-civilian-infrastructure-aims-to-bring-iran-to-its-knees\\_6751333\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2026/03/11/bombing-of-civilian-infrastructure-aims-to-bring-iran-to-its-knees_6751333_4.html)>.

77 UN Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (13 February 2026). "Energy Attacks amid an Unusually Harsh Winter Are Exposing Ukraine's Civilians to Extreme Hardship, UN Human Rights Monitors Say", <<https://ukraine.un.org/en/310140-energy-attacks-amid-unusually-harsh-winter-are-exposing-ukraine%E2%80%99s-civilians-extreme-hardship>>.

78 Jason Burke and William Christou (11 March 2026). "Iran Escalates Attacks on Infrastructure and Transport Networks across the Gulf". The Guardian, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/mar/11/iran-escalates-attacks-on-infrastructure-and-transport-networks-across-the-gulf>>.

79 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (15 May 2025) (S/2025/271), [50–54].

80 ICRC (2024). "International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts". International Review of the Red Cross, 106(927), p.1357–1450, <<https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/reports-and-documents-ihl-and-the-challenges-of-contemporary-armed-conflicts-927>>.

81 Human Rights Watch (1 July 2025). "Five European States Withdraw from Mine Ban Treaty", <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/01/five-european-states-withdraw-from-mine-ban-treaty>>.

82 For one recent analysis, see Michael Schmitt, Tess Bridgeman, and Ryan Goodman (22 April 2026). "On Ambassador Waltz's Defense of Potential Law of War Violations in the Iran Conflict". Just Security, <<https://www.justsecurity.org/136882/ambassador-waltz-law-war-crimes/>>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

were adopted. In addition, only 61 percent of the resolutions adopted in 2025 had the support of all 15 Council members. This is less than the 65 percent adopted unanimously in 2024, and it represents a low level of consensus for the post-Cold War period, during which the Council typically adopted between 80 and 90 percent of its resolutions unanimously. Other outcomes that require the consent of all members, such as presidential statements and press statements, have declined as well.<sup>83</sup>

The use of the veto also continued in 2025, with four negative votes cast by permanent members: the US on two draft resolutions on Gaza, and Russia on two amendments to a draft resolution on the war in Ukraine. This was a decrease from the eight vetoes cast in 2024—which was the highest number of vetoes in any year since 1986—but still illustrative of increasingly entrenched Council gridlock. Indeed, the average number of vetoes cast per year has risen steadily since the end of the Cold War: from just one in the 1990s, to over one-and-a-half in the 2000s, to three in the 2010s, to five so far this decade—the same annual average as the 1950s and 1970s, albeit lower than the 1980s, which saw an average of seven.<sup>84</sup>

At the same time as Council decisions and consensus have declined, the annual number of meetings convened has remained persistently high compared to past decades. In 2025, the Council held 255 formal meetings, which is a reduction of 16 percent with respect to the record year of 2024, when it held 305 formal meetings, but still nearly five times higher than the number held at the end of the Cold War in 1991. More broadly, like the use of the veto, the average annual number of formal meetings has risen steadily since that period: from 118 meetings in the 1990s to 285 so far in the 2020s, representing an increase in average weekly meetings from slightly over two to five and a half (excluding the years 2020 and 2021, during which the Council adopted special VTC working procedures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic). Lamenting this combination of declining outcomes and increasing meeting frequency, the ambassador of a recent elected member cautioned that the Council was at risk of turning itself into a “talk show”<sup>85</sup>—a frequently expressed concern in recent years.

Similar trends characterise the Council’s consideration of civilian protection issues specifically. In both the 2000s and 2010s, the Council adopted an annual average of approximately 59 decisions—meaning both resolutions and presidential statements—containing PoC-related provisions. Between 2020 and 2025, that average fell to 44, including only 29 last year—the lowest number recorded in the PoC Dashboard maintained by the UN Security Council Affairs Division (SCAD), which tracks PoC language going back to 1999.<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, the average volume of PoC-related language in each adopted decision has also plateaued: after a steady rise through the 2000s and early 2010s, the density peaked in 2015 and has generally

decreased since, with 2025 marking the lowest level since 2011.<sup>87</sup> This overall decline in PoC-related decisions and language has persisted despite the global increase in armed conflict and civilian harms described above, including the outbreak or deterioration of a series of particularly devastating protection crises since 2020. Indeed, following its delayed and largely unheeded call for a global cessation of hostilities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council has routinely struggled to effectively address several other situations with catastrophic consequences for civilians, as illustrated by the following examples:

- After the crisis in Tigray, Ethiopia broke out in November 2020, the Council initially failed to agree even on holding public meetings on the situation. This was due to some members—including the Council’s three African members (A3)—opposing Council involvement, arguing that the body should allow the African Union (AU) to lead the international community’s response. Those positions eventually evolved as the conflict intensified and the humanitarian situation deteriorated, prompting the Council to discuss the situation on multiple occasions—including four times in public meetings—but it still did not ever adopt a formal decision on the conflict.
- The Council took over a month to adopt a presidential statement expressing concern about the situation in Myanmar following the military coup that took place in February 2021.<sup>88</sup> As was the case for Tigray, some members argued that the Council should defer to regional organisations and not pre-empt action by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It therefore took almost two more years for the Council to adopt resolution 2669 of 21 December 2022, which demanded an immediate end to the violence and the release of political prisoners. The text, which was adopted with three abstentions (China, India, and Russia), was not implemented and remains the Council’s only resolution on the current conflict. Moreover, the Council has only been able to convene one formal open meeting on the situation—in April 2024<sup>89</sup>—and has otherwise discussed it only in private meetings and consultations.
- Following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia vetoed two draft resolutions on the conflict: one in February condemning its invasion and a second in September declaring the illegality of its “so-called referenda” in occupied territories. Two other draft resolutions that year, authored by Russia, were not adopted due to insufficient votes, and proposed outcomes on the humanitarian situation and the Black Sea grain deal did not advance. The Council did still reach agreement on two other outcomes: a presidential statement supporting the Secretary-General’s efforts to seek a peaceful solution to the war,<sup>90</sup> and a procedural resolution (where the veto does not apply) referring the situation to the General

83 Security Council Report. “In Hindsight: The Security Council in 2025 and the Year Ahead”. (January 2026 Monthly Forecast, 30 December 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-01/in-hindsight-the-security-council-in-2025-and-the-year-ahead.php>>.

84 UN Security Council Affairs Division. “Vetoes since 1946”, <<https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/veto>>. For more on the veto, see Security Council Report. Living with the Veto, Research Report no.1. (23 March 2026), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/research-reports/living-with-the-veto.php>>.

85 Comments at an NGO Working Group meeting in 2025.

86 UN Security Council Affairs Division. “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Dashboard”, <<https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/repertoire/research-tools/protection-civilians-armed-conflict>>.

87 The exceptions to this trend were surges in 2021 and 2024, which were likely caused by the adoption in those two years of thematic resolutions with a high density of PoC-related language: resolution 2573 of 27 April 2021 on the protection of critical civilian infrastructure and resolution 2730 of 24 May 2024 on the protection of humanitarian and UN personnel.

88 Statement by the President of the Security Council (10 March 2021) (S/PRST/2021/5).

89 Security Council Report. “Myanmar: Open Briefing”. (What’s in Blue, 3 April 2024), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/04/myanmar-open-briefing.php>>.

90 Statement by the President of the Security Council (6 May 2022) (S/PRST/2022/3).

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

Assembly.<sup>91</sup> Those remained the Council’s only decisions on the conflict until February 2025, when altered P5 dynamics following the election of US President Donald Trump led to the adoption of resolution 2774, which called for a “swift end” to the conflict.<sup>92</sup> That outcome was adopted after Russia vetoed two amendments proposed by the Council’s European members, all of which subsequently abstained on the resolution.

- After civil war broke out in Sudan in April 2023, the Council closed the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) in December that year following a request from host-state authorities.<sup>93</sup> In 2024, the Council managed to adopt two other resolutions on the situation—one in March calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities during Ramadan<sup>94</sup> and one in June demanding that Rapid Support Forces (RSF) halt the siege of El Fasher<sup>95</sup>—but these were not implemented. In November of that year, Russia vetoed a draft resolution aimed at advancing measures to protect civilians in Sudan.<sup>96</sup>
- Between October 2023 and October 2025, the US vetoed five draft resolutions on the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. China and Russia vetoed two US-proposed draft resolutions, in both cases accompanied by the negative vote of the Arab member of the Council (the United Arab Emirates [UAE] in 2023 and Algeria in 2024). Four resolutions were nonetheless adopted during this time, including resolution 2735 of 10 June 2024, which welcomed the ceasefire proposal announced by then-US President Joe Biden the month before. This ceasefire was not implemented until January 2025, however, and it broke down two months later when Israel cut off all humanitarian aid to Gaza and subsequently resumed hostilities. The Council later adopted resolution 2803 of 17 November 2025, endorsing a new US-proposed ceasefire, which has been routinely violated but remained in effect at the time of writing. Both China and Russia abstained on that resolution.

The specific dynamics surrounding each of these situations varied, illustrating different causes and forms of Council inaction. In some instances—such as Tigray and Myanmar—the conflicts’ perceived political sensitivities prevented the Council from even convening public meetings, as some members argued that the body should defer to regional organisations, despite the challenges that these entities also faced in crafting effective responses. In other situations—such as Gaza and Ukraine—global public interest led to frequent Council meetings, but permanent members routinely blocked more substantive responses. Regardless of the specific circumstances, common to each case is that the Council failed to expeditiously facilitate an end to a conflict wreaking immense civilian harm or to even mitigate this harm in a significant way.

The Council has arguably achieved more progress in its thematic approach to PoC. In contrast to the gridlock blocking many responses to country-specific situations, the Council has continued to adopt products on a variety of cross-cutting issues. Typically penned by

elected members, these products have proven more attainable as they are more insulated from the geopolitical polarisation affecting country-specific outcomes. Since 2020, the Council has adopted—unanimously unless otherwise noted—the following thematic resolutions that focus on or are relevant to PoC:

- Resolution 2573 of 27 April 2021, penned by Viet Nam, condemned attacks against civilian objects indispensable to survival—including food systems, water infrastructure, and medical facilities—and called on parties to armed conflict to comply fully with IHL protecting such objects.
- Resolution 2594 of 9 September 2021, penned by Ireland, set out principles to guide the transition and drawdown of UN peace operations. Regarding PoC, the text expressed the importance of appropriately configuring UN field presences with necessary capabilities and capacities to provide support to protection efforts during transitions, as well as its intention to consider measures through which a reconfigured UN presence could provide such support.
- Resolution 2601 of 29 October 2021, co-penned by Niger and Norway, condemned attacks and threats of attack against schools, educational facilities, and civilians connected with schools. It also emphasised the need to facilitate the continuation of education in situations of armed conflict.
- Resolution 2664 of 9 December 2022, co-penned by Ireland and the US, established a standing humanitarian exemption to asset freeze measures across UN sanctions regimes, deciding that humanitarian assistance and activities supporting basic human needs do not violate sanctions. It was adopted with 14 votes in favour and an abstention from India, which had concerns about the application of the carve-out to the 1267/1989/2253 ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida sanctions regime.<sup>97</sup>
- Resolution 2730 of 24 May 2024, penned by Switzerland, condemned attacks against humanitarian and UN personnel and called for measures to strengthen their protection and ensure accountability for violence against them. It requested the Secretary-General to submit recommendations to this end and—echoing the notification requirement in resolution 2417 on conflict and hunger—to report “swiftly” to the Council when “widespread issues” regarding the safety and security of humanitarian and UN personnel occur. The resolution was adopted with 14 votes in favour and an abstention from Russia, which objected to the resolution’s reference to international courts, its proposed parameters for ensuring humanitarian access, and its gender-related language.<sup>98</sup>
- Resolution 2764 of 20 December 2024, penned by Malta, highlighted the need to facilitate adequate and sustainable child protection capacities in UN peace operations, including in the context of transitions to or from UN missions.

In addition to the above resolutions, the Council has also adopted

91 UNSC Resolution 2623 (27 February 2022) (S/RES/2623).

92 UNSC Resolution 2774 (24 February 2025) (S/RES/2774).

93 UNSC Resolution 2736 (13 June 2024) (S/RES/2736).

94 UNSC Resolution 2724 (8 March 2024) (S/RES/2724).

95 Security Council Report. “Sudan: Vote on a Draft Resolution”. (What’s in Blue, 13 June 2024), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/06/sudan-vote-on-a-draft-resolution-2.php>>.

96 Security Council Report. “Sudan: Vote on a Draft Resolution”. (What’s in Blue, 17 November 2024), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/11/103323.php>>.

97 UNSC 9214th Meeting Record (9 December 2022) (S/PV.9214).

98 UNSC 9634th Meeting Record (24 May 2024) (S/PV.9634).

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

several PoC-related presidential statements since 2020, including on CAAC,<sup>99</sup> conflict and hunger,<sup>100</sup> and missing persons in armed conflict.<sup>101</sup> Notably, however, there was no attempt to have the Council officially recognise the most recent edition of OCHA’s aide-mémoire—launched in February 2024—through a presidential statement, as had been customary practice previously. This was apparently due to a perception among relevant stakeholders that unanimity on such a product would not be possible in the prevailing Council environment, which was not expected to permit consensus on the previously agreed language that the updated aide-mémoire references.

At the subsidiary level, the IEG on PoC has continued to meet routinely. While still most often convening on country-specific situations prior to the renewal of relevant peacekeeping mandates, the group has increasingly addressed situations where the UN does not currently have a field presence as well as certain thematic issues.<sup>102</sup> Recently, elected members have also begun playing a larger role within the group, with Switzerland (2023-2024) and subsequently Denmark (2025-2026) serving as co-chair alongside the UK. Additionally, Bahrain (2026-2027) and Denmark have initiated a similar format in their capacities as the Council’s informal focal points on conflict and hunger, convening expert meetings on situations on the Council’s agenda that the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Food Programme (WFP) have identified as “hunger hotspots”.<sup>103</sup>

In sum, the Council’s recent practice suggests a growing imbalance between activity and effectiveness in its protection role. While it meets with increasing frequency and engages extensively on the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict—including on the subsidiary level—this expanded deliberative activity has not translated into more consistent or decisive outcomes. Declining agreement among members, increased recourse to the veto, and persistent divisions over the appropriate scope of Council action have constrained its ability to respond to rapidly deteriorating protection crises. These dynamics have been particularly evident in country-specific situations, where responses have often been delayed, diluted, or blocked altogether, even in the face of widespread civilian harm. At the same time, the Council has maintained a more regular pace of engagement on thematic protection issues, where political sensitivities are lower and agreement is more attainable. The result is a Council that remains an important normative forum for articulating standards and principles on the protection of civilians yet is increasingly unable to apply those standards consistently in the situations where they are most urgently needed. The following sub-sections examine how this pattern has shaped the Council’s engagement across four key areas of the PoC agenda.

#### ii.a. Accountability

The above challenges are perhaps most apparent in the area of accountability. The few substantive decisions that the Council has been able to issue on protection crises on its agenda have been routinely breached by conflict parties, with the same Council divisions impeding the body from imposing costs for non-compliance or advancing new mechanisms to investigate and prosecute international crimes. In practice, the Council has therefore struggled not only to halt ongoing atrocities but also to follow through when its own demands are ignored, reinforcing a broader perception that violations of IHL and abuses of IHRL will carry few immediate consequences at the multilateral level.

Impunity has been a persistent feature of the international system that predates the period under review. The political fallout from the Council’s response to the 2011 Libyan civil war may be seen as a key inflection point marking subsequent divisions in this regard. At that time, the Council referred the situation to the ICC and authorised the use of force to protect civilians—enabling a NATO-led military intervention—in what remain, to date, the Council’s last major Chapter VII coercive actions against a state for civilian protection purposes. In 2014, China and Russia vetoed a draft resolution on Syria proposed by France that would have referred the situation to the ICC, with Russia explicitly citing Libya as a cautionary precedent in its explanation of vote.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, after Myanmar’s military escalated violence in Rakhine state in 2017, triggering the mass displacement of the Rohingya, the Human Rights Council’s (HRC) Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) on Myanmar issued a report concluding that state forces had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. The report recommended that the Council refer the situation in Myanmar to the ICC or create an ad hoc international criminal tribunal similar to those set up to prosecute crimes in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.<sup>105</sup> The Council never took up those recommendations, however, and a briefing on the report by the chair of the FFM was contested by China, Russia, and then-member Bolivia, requiring a procedural vote before it was able to proceed.<sup>106</sup>

The Council did succeed in pursuing accountability measures in other situations on its agenda around this time. Notably, in September 2017, it established both a sanctions regime for Mali with PoC-related provisions<sup>107</sup> and mandated UNITAD to collect evidence of international crimes committed by ISIL/Daesh in Iraq.<sup>108</sup> Those two mechanisms were created with the consent of the affected country, however, and were therefore less politically contentious.

In more recent negotiations since 2020, the Council’s general aversion to accountability measures has persisted and, in some cases, even extended to language simply referencing such measures. In 2022, the initial draft of resolution 2669 on Myanmar—penned

99 Statement by the President of the Security Council (12 February 2020) (S/PRST/2020/3); Statement by the President of the Security Council (10 September 2020) (S/PRST/2020/8).

100 Statement by the President of the Security Council (29 April 2020) (S/PRST/2020/6); Statement by the President of the Security Council (3 August 2023) (S/PRST/2023/4).

101 Statement by the President of the Security Council (28 June 2024) (S/PRST/2024/4).

102 For instance, the group held a meeting on Sudan in December 2025 and a meeting on persons with disabilities in armed conflict in July 2025.

103 FAO and WFP (12 November 2025). Hunger Hotspots: FAO-WFP Early Warnings on Acute Food Insecurity, November 2025 to May 2026 Outlook, <<https://www.wfp.org/publications/hunger-hotspots-fao-wfp-early-warnings-acute-food-insecurity>>. The first such meeting was held on Haiti in March 2026.

104 UNSC 7180th Meeting Record (22 May 2014) (S/PV.7180).

105 Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (12 September 2018) (A/HRC/39/64).

106 UNSC 8381st Meeting Record (24 October 2018) (S/PV.8381).

107 Security Council Report. “Security Council Establishes a Mali Sanctions Regime”. (What’s in Blue, 5 September 2017), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2017/09/security-council-establishes-a-mali-sanctions-regime.php>>.

108 Security Council Report. “ISIL (Daesh) Accountability: Vote on Draft Resolution”. (What’s in Blue, 21 September 2017), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2017/09/isil-daesh-accountability-vote-on-draft-resolution.php>>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

by the UK—apparently included language on the Council’s determination to consider all measures at its disposal, including those under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, should the Myanmar military authorities fail to act consistently with the resolution. However, several members—including Brazil, China, India, and Russia—opposed this language, and it was eventually struck from the text.<sup>109</sup> In 2023, following pressure from some of these same members, the Council acquiesced to a request by the Iraqi government to close UNITAD after a prolonged dispute about the mechanism’s terms of reference that prevented it from supporting domestic prosecutions that could result in the death penalty.<sup>110</sup> The following year, the draft resolution on measures to protect civilians in Sudan urged concrete steps to ensure that perpetrators of IHL violations and human rights abuses are held accountable through “adequate, transparent, independent, and credible accountability mechanisms”, but the text was vetoed by Russia. Notably, the two resolutions authorising non-UN forces that the Council adopted last year—respectively authorising the deployment of an International Stabilisation Force (ISF) to Gaza and a Gang Suppression Force (GSF) to Haiti—did not include substantive language on accountability either.

Similar patterns have also played out with regard to recent thematic resolutions, despite the less contentious dynamics otherwise characterising these products. During the 2021 negotiations on resolution 2573 on critical civilian infrastructure, Russia apparently objected to references to international prosecution for violations, which were not included in the final text.<sup>111</sup> Similarly, during the 2024 negotiations on resolution 2764 on CAAC, several Council members apparently pushed for stronger references to international accountability mechanisms such as the ICC, but those proposals were not incorporated due to opposition from some permanent members.<sup>112</sup> That same year, initial drafts of resolution 2730 on the protection of humanitarian and UN personnel included language highlighting the ICC’s contributions in prosecuting persons allegedly responsible for serious IHL violations, but this reference was opposed by Algeria, China, and Russia.<sup>113</sup> The final text still retained language urging states to “cooperate with domestic, regional and international courts and tribunals in accordance with [their] respective obligations”, which prompted Russia to abstain.<sup>114</sup> In July 2024, two months after the adoption of resolution 2730, Switzerland introduced a draft presidential statement marking the 75th anniversary

of the Geneva Conventions. Modelled on the presidential statement marking the 70th anniversary in 2019, the draft stressed the importance of accountability for violations of IHL, among other provisions, but members apparently failed to reach consensus because of opposition from Russia (which had also opposed the inclusion of some accountability language in 2019).<sup>115</sup> More recently, during its January 2026 presidency, Somalia apparently proposed a draft presidential statement on the rule of law in connection with its open debate on the topic but decided not to pursue the initiative after the US indicated that it was opposed to such a product.

The Council has also neglected to penalise violations of the decisions that it has been able to reach. The aforementioned resolutions on Myanmar, Sudan, and Gaza that the Council did eventually adopt have all gone unheeded or been routinely breached by conflict parties without prompting further enforcement action. Although 2024 was the deadliest year on record for journalists, humanitarian personnel, and healthcare workers in conflict, the Council did not move to hold any perpetrators to account, despite having adopted one or more resolutions reinforcing specific protection obligations for each of those groups. And it has not taken any measures to ensure accountability for the targeting of critical civilian infrastructure in Ukraine or across the Middle East despite the unanimous adoption of resolution 2573 on the protection of such infrastructure.<sup>116</sup>

As a result of this reluctance to employ or even reference a wide range of accountability tools—especially international judicial mechanisms<sup>117</sup>—the Council’s accountability practice since 2020 has been largely limited to the use of sanctions. Although such measures are not punitive and cannot replace judicial processes in the pursuit of accountability, they are a tool by which the Council may enforce its decisions and impose costs for their violation. Currently, as in 2019, eight of 14 active sanctions regimes explicitly include PoC-related designation criteria. These are the regimes for Al-Shabaab, the CAR, the DRC, Haiti, Libya, South Sudan, Sudan, and Yemen. The Haiti regime is the most recent, established in 2022 as the multidimensional crisis in the country deteriorated following the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse the year before, and China—which had previously called for the Council to curtail its engagement on Haiti—changed its position and advocated for stronger Council action, enabling the regime’s establishment.<sup>118</sup> That briefly brought the number of active regimes to 15, until the Mali sanctions regime

109 Security Council Report. “Myanmar: Vote on Draft Resolution”. (What’s in Blue, 21 December 2022) <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2022/12/myanmar-vote-on-draft-resolution.php>>.

110 Security Council Report. “Iraq: Vote on UNITAD Mandate Renewal”. (What’s in Blue, 14 September 2023), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/09/iraq-vote-on-unitad-mandate-renewal-2.php>>.

111 Security Council Report. “Protection of Civilians: High-level Open VTC Debate on Protection of Critical Infrastructure”. (What’s in Blue, 26 April 2021), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/04/protection-of-civilians-high-level-open-vtc-debate-on-protection-of-critical-infrastructure.php>>.

112 Security Council Report. “Children and Armed Conflict: Vote on a Draft Resolution on Child Protection Capacities in UN Peace Operations”. (What’s in Blue, 19 December 2024), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/12/children-and-armed-conflict-vote-on-a-draft-resolution-on-child-protection-capacities-in-un-peace-operations.php>>.

113 Security Council Report. “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Vote on a Draft Resolution”. (What’s in Blue, 23 May 2024), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/05/protection-of-civilians-in-armed-conflict-vote-on-a-draft-resolution.php>>.

114 UNSC 9634th Meeting Record (24 May 2024) (S/PV.9634).

115 Statement by the President of the Security Council (20 August 2019) (S/PRST/2019/8). For those negotiation details, see Security Council Report. “Presidential Statement on International Humanitarian Law”. (What’s in Blue, 20 August 2019), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2019/08/presidential-statement-on-international-humanitarian-law.php>>.

116 Resolution 2817 of 11 March 2026, penned by Bahrain on behalf of the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Jordan, did deplore Iran’s strikes against civilian objects in these countries and demand that Iran immediately halt them. But the strikes continued without further Council action until Iran and the US agreed on a ceasefire one month later. An alternative and more general draft resolution on the Middle East crisis penned by Russia (S/2026/159), which condemned all attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure and called for their protection in line with IHL, failed to be adopted due to insufficient votes. See Security Council Report. “The Middle East Crisis: Votes on Two Draft Resolutions”. (What’s in Blue, 11 March 2026), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2026/03/the-middle-east-crisis-votes-on-two-draft-resolutions.php>>.

117 Language concerning the ICC has become particularly contentious in recent years. After the Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin in March 2023, Russia has harshly criticized it and pushed for the Council to withdraw its referrals of the situations in Darfur and Libya. Subsequently, following the Court’s issuance of arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant—as well as a Hamas commander—in November 2024, the US under the current Trump administration has imposed unilateral sanctions on ICC officials.

118 Security Council Report. “Haiti: Vote on Draft Resolution Establishing a Sanctions Regime”. (What’s in Blue, 21 October 2022), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2022/10/haiti-vote-on-draft-resolution-establishing-a-sanctions-regime.php>>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

was abruptly shut down in 2023 after Malian authorities requested the Council to terminate it, and Russia subsequently vetoed a draft resolution that would have renewed it.<sup>119</sup>

The most common PoC-related listing criteria in the extant sanctions regimes relate to IHL violations and IHRL abuses, including attacks against UN, humanitarian, or medical personnel and the obstruction or hindrance of humanitarian access and aid. Six regimes also provide for the possible listing of individuals and entities deemed responsible for acts of violence against women and girls, as well as for violations and abuses related to children affected by armed conflict. When reviewing the ISIL (Da'esh)/Al-Qaida sanctions regime in 2024, the Council recognised that acts involving SGBV may be eligible for designation under existing criteria when such acts are used by the groups or associated entities or individuals as a tactic of terrorism.<sup>120</sup>

Given the political dynamics currently preventing the Council from undertaking more robust action to enforce its PoC-related decisions or promote accountability for their violation, the mainstreaming of protection-centred designation criteria across regimes would be a positive development in an otherwise challenging Council environment. Yet it appears that such criteria are inconsistently applied. Of the 737 individuals designated across all UN sanctions regimes as at April 2026, only 149 were listed under the eight regimes with explicit PoC-related designation criteria.<sup>121</sup> A provisional review of the narrative summaries for those individuals indicates significant variation in designation practice: reasons for listing are described with differing levels of specificity, and only a minority explicitly reference a stand-alone PoC-related criterion.<sup>122</sup> This suggests that PoC violations are sporadically invoked as grounds for listing and that sanctions are seldom explicitly operationalised as an enforcement tool for protective purposes.

Taken together, these developments point to a marked contraction in the Council's willingness to take accountability measures in response to serious violations against civilians. Indeed, the Council's accountability practice has shifted from coercive judicial enforcement (Yugoslavia/Rwanda), hybrid courts (Lebanon/Sierra Leone), ICC referrals (Darfur/Libya), and non-prosecutorial investigative mechanisms (the CAR/Iraq) to the present near-total paralysis outside existing sanctions regimes, which remain an underutilised tool to impose costs for PoC violations.

As a result, concerted international efforts to promote accountability are now largely taking place outside the Council. This trend started in the previous decade, with initiatives such as the "Code of Conduct regarding Security Council action against genocide, crimes

against humanity or war crimes" introduced by the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) Group in 2015,<sup>123</sup> as well as the "International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism [IIIM] for Syria to Assist in the Investigation of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes Under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011", which was mandated by the General Assembly in 2016.<sup>124</sup> More recent developments since 2020 include the Veto Initiative adopted by the General Assembly in 2022,<sup>125</sup> the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to IHL launched by Brazil, China, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan, South Africa, and the ICRC in 2024,<sup>126</sup> and the Hague Group initiated by a coalition of Global South countries in 2025 to uphold international law in Palestine.<sup>127</sup> Meanwhile, the Council itself has increasingly confined itself to declaratory language that often avoids even references to accountability tools, all while IHL violations have intensified across multiple conflicts on its agenda. Absent a shift in these political dynamics—or a greater willingness by members to operationalise the accountability provisions already embedded in sanctions regimes—the Council's capacity to reinforce compliance with protection norms is likely to remain severely constrained, further entrenching the perception that grave violations against civilians can occur with minimal risk of collective enforcement at the international level.

#### ii.b. Humanitarian Access

The Security Council has repeatedly highlighted humanitarian access as a central pillar of the PoC agenda. Through thematic resolutions and country-specific decisions, it has consistently demanded that all parties to conflict allow and facilitate rapid, safe, and unimpeded humanitarian access to populations in need, in accordance with IHL. These pronouncements reflect the recognition that the delivery of life-saving assistance is inseparable from broader civilian protection efforts, particularly in conflicts marked by mass displacement, food insecurity, and the destruction of essential services. Yet despite the Council's sustained emphasis on this principle, Secretary-General reporting over the past several years indicates that humanitarian actors continue to encounter significant obstacles when attempting to reach affected populations, again underscoring the persistent gap between the Council's normative commitments and realities on the ground.

Across the Secretary-General's annual PoC reports, humanitarian access is consistently described as being constrained by a combination of security, political, bureaucratic, and logistical obstacles. Active hostilities, explosive remnants of war, and insecurity frequently prevent aid organisations from reaching affected populations, while

119 Security Council Report. "Mali: Vote to Renew the Sanctions Regime". (What's in Blue, 30 August 2023), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/08/mali-vote-to-renew-the-sanctions-regime.php>>.

120 UNSC Resolution 2734 (10 June 2024) (S/RES/2734), [3]; Security Council Report. "Counter-Terrorism: Vote on a Draft Resolution on the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Regime". (What's in Blue, 10 June 2024), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/06/counter-terrorism-vote-on-a-draft-resolution-on-the-isil-daesh-and-al-qaida-sanctions-regime.php>>.

121 Al-Shabaab: 23. CAR: 14. DRC: 44. Haiti: 9. Libya: 28. South Sudan: 8. Sudan: 13. Yemen: 10. Note that approximately one third (255) of all individuals subject to UN sanctions are designated under the ISIL (Da'esh)/Al-Qaida regime. UNSC. "United Nations Security Council Consolidated List", <<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/un-sc-consolidated-list>>. 122 Based on the provisional analysis, the proportion may be as low as 20-30 percent. This is due to several factors. Sometimes the listed individual was simply designated for a non-PoC-related reason. Sometimes the reason for listing is unclear, referring broadly to a sanctions resolution without specifying the paragraph under which the designation was made; to a specific paragraph that contains several grounds for listing; or to association with an entity that is sanctioned for multiple reasons. It should be noted that the narrative summaries also contain a section reserved for "additional information", which sometimes give fuller accounts of the listed individual's actions and may contain descriptions of PoC-related violations that are not referenced in the entry's formal reason for listing. As such, there are likely more individuals for which such violations were a contributing factor in their designation than this analysis would indicate, even if those actions are not clearly cited as the primary reason for listing. A detailed review of all narrative summaries is beyond the scope of this report, however, and the main analytical point remains that PoC is only sporadically foregrounded as the decisive grounds for designation.

123 Letter dated 14 December 2015 from the Permanent Representative of Liechtenstein to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (A/70/621-S/2015/978).

124 UNGA Resolution 71/248 (21 December 2016) (A/RES/71/248).

125 UNGA Resolution 76/262 (26 April 2022) (A/RES/76/262).

126 ICRC. "Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law", <<https://www.icrc.org/en/global-initiative-international-humanitarian-law>>.

127 The Hague Group. "Launch of The Hague Group, January 2025", <<https://thehaguegroup.org/meetings-hague-en/>>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

violence against humanitarian personnel—including killings, kidnappings, detention, and attacks on facilities and convoys—has become increasingly common. At the same time, governments and armed actors often impose bureaucratic and administrative restrictions—such as visa delays, complex registration procedures, movement restrictions, checkpoint delays, and interference in beneficiary selection or programming—that slow or halt operations. Sanctions regimes, counterterrorism legislation, and financial “de-risking” by banks and suppliers also complicate the transfer of funds and delivery of supplies, creating operational delays and logistical hurdles. Additional barriers include shortages of fuel, cash, and essential commodities; misinformation and disinformation that erode trust in humanitarian actors; and the politicisation or instrumentalisation of aid by parties to conflict. The Secretary-General’s 2025 PoC report highlighted such challenges in the DRC, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), among other situations.

These obstacles have often featured in the Council’s annual PoC debates. On occasion, it has also held meetings specifically dedicated to them. France, for instance, convened a ministerial-level briefing on the protection of humanitarian space as a signature event during its July 2021 presidency.<sup>128</sup> The following month, Kenya organised an Arria-formula meeting on challenges to humanitarian action in situations of armed conflict and counterterrorism operations.<sup>129</sup> At those sessions, speakers highlighted several of the trends described above, notably the growing politicisation and instrumentalisation of humanitarian assistance, including its use by parties to conflict for strategic purposes; the shrinking operational space for humanitarian actors, driven by insecurity, attacks on personnel and infrastructure, and restrictions on engagement with affected populations; and the impact of sanctions and counterterrorism measures, which—absent effective safeguards—impede access, disrupt operations, and transfer risk onto humanitarian organisations and local actors. Although the Council was largely united in expressing concern about these challenges, the July 2021 briefing also illustrated different positions on the appropriate framework for humanitarian assistance: several members—such as France, Ireland, and Norway—emphasised the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, while others—including China, Russia, India, and Viet Nam—also emphasised the importance of state sovereignty and consent of the concerned member state, as outlined in the UN guiding principles for humanitarian assistance adopted by the General Assembly in 1991.<sup>130</sup>

While these diverging views have at times complicated negotiations on humanitarian language in Council products,<sup>131</sup> members have managed to reach agreement on a variety of measures to address access impediments. Most commonly in country-specific situations, the Council has mandated peace operations to facilitate

the immediate, full, safe, and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance. Missions in Abyei, the CAR, the DRC, Lebanon, and South Sudan currently have such mandates.

The Council has also sought to address structural impediments to humanitarian delivery in its thematic work. Resolution 2664 established a humanitarian exemption to UN asset freeze measures across all sanctions regimes, responding to concerns that sanctions implementation and financial de-risking were impeding humanitarian operations. Member states such as the UK and US, as well as regional organisations like the EU, have since incorporated the carve-out into their implementation frameworks for UN regimes, while some have also exceeded their legal obligations by applying equivalent provisions in their autonomous (non-UN) regimes. This illustrates the important normative effect of the resolution, which has “set a new global standard for safeguarding humanitarian action when imposing sanctions” and had a positive impact on humanitarian operations in sanctions-affected contexts such as Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and the Sahel.<sup>132</sup> Progress has been more limited in national counterterrorism frameworks, however, which apply to many of the same contexts as UN sanctions and impose sanctions-like obligations—some required by Security Council resolutions—to suppress the financing of terrorism and to criminalise support to terrorism, which may still have a detrimental impact on humanitarian operations.<sup>133</sup>

The Council also took action to protect humanitarian and UN personnel through the adoption of resolution 2730, which requested the Secretary-General to provide recommendations on measures to prevent and respond to attacks against such personnel and to regularly update the Council on their safety and security in both thematic and country-specific reporting. Similar to the ad hoc reporting mandate under resolution 2417 on conflict-induced hunger, the resolution also requested the Secretary-General to notify the Council “swiftly” when widespread issues arise regarding the safety and security of humanitarian and UN personnel, signalling the Council’s intention to give such situations its “full attention”.<sup>134</sup> While the Secretary-General has yet to submit such an alert in accordance with the resolution, its adoption reflects another attempt by the Council to address systemic obstacles to humanitarian access even as implementation challenges persist.

The Council has taken additional steps in particularly challenging country-specific situations, with varying success. In Syria, for instance, the Council established a cross-border aid mechanism through resolution 2165 of 14 July 2014, which allowed the delivery of humanitarian assistance into non-government-controlled parts of Syria without the consent of the host government, requiring only notification to the authorities. The resolution also requested the Secretary-General to report monthly on its implementation, after which the Council split its engagement on Syria’s humanitarian and

128 UNSC 8822nd Meeting Record (27 July 2021) (S/PV.8822).

129 Security Council Report. “Arria-formula Meeting on Overcoming Challenges to Humanitarian Action in Situations of Armed Conflict and Counter-Terrorism Operations”. (What’s in Blue, 10 August 2021), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/08/arria-formula-meeting-on-overcoming-challenges-to-humanitarian-action-in-situations-of-armed-conflict-and-counter-terrorism-operations.php>>.

130 UNGA Resolution 46/182 (19 December 1991) (A/RES/46/182).

131 For examples, see Security Council Report. “In Hindsight: Humanitarian Space and the Security Council”. (September 2021 Monthly Forecast, 31 August 2021), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2021-09/in-hindsight-humanitarian-space-and-the-security-council.php>>.

132 See e.g. Alice Debarre (November 2024). Safeguarding Humanitarian Action from the Unintended Effects of Sanctions: Resolution 2664 and the 1267 ISIL/al-Qaida Regime. International Peace Institute, p.4-5, <<https://www.ipinst.org/2024/11/resolution-2664-and-the-1267-isil-al-qaeda-regime>>.

133 Ibid. See also Dustin A. Lewis, Radhika Kapoor, and Naz K. Modirzadeh (March 2024). Resolution 2664 (2022) and Counterterrorism Measures: An Analytical Frame for States. Harvard Law School Program on International Law and Armed Conflict, <<https://pilac.law.harvard.edu/res-2664-and-counterterrorism-measures>>. In interviews, UN officials expressed similar concerns.

134 The Secretary-General transmitted his recommendations to the Security Council in November 2024 (S/2024/852). The Council held a briefing on the recommendations in November 2024 (S/PV.9795) and convened annual meetings on the implementation of resolution 2730 in April 2025 (S/PV.9889) and April 2026 (S/PV.10131).

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

political situations into separate tracks—associated with separate meeting cycles and penholders—which some members hoped would insulate the Council’s humanitarian efforts from the deadlocked political dynamics characterising the file.

While this appeared to work for several years, the cross-border mechanism became increasingly contentious. China and Russia—in line with their emphasis on the UN guiding principles for humanitarian assistance—argued that cross-border aid deliveries without government consent were extraordinary measures that undermined Syria’s sovereignty and should be supplanted as soon as possible by “cross-line” assistance that delivered supplies via Syrian government-held areas. Abstentions on the draft resolutions renewing the mechanism were common from 2017, and after 2019 all but two adoptions came after competing draft resolutions, vetoes, and resolutions that failed due to insufficient votes. The mechanism was finally shut down in 2023, when Russia vetoed a draft resolution that would have renewed the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for nine months, and Russia’s alternative draft renewing it for six months failed to garner enough votes for adoption.<sup>135</sup> The Council’s humanitarian and political tracks subsequently remerged, as the contentious negotiations surrounding the mechanism illustrated how humanitarian access arrangements had themselves become implicated in the broader geopolitical dispute.

These dynamics also shaped the Council’s handling of Russia’s war in Ukraine, which it similarly split into separate political and humanitarian tracks. Taking up the role as co-penholders for the latter shortly after Russia’s February 2022 invasion, France and Mexico led negotiations on a draft resolution addressing the humanitarian situation in Ukraine. The initial draft text did not contain explicit references to Russia or its invasion, but rather a list of humanitarian demands, including unhindered access for humanitarian assistance. However, several Western members wanted the text to explicitly reference Russia’s role in causing the humanitarian crisis and call for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. China and Russia, by contrast, expressed a preference for a text devoid of what they termed political language, such as references to any particular member state. Unable to bridge this divide in the Council, France and Mexico eventually decided to take their draft to the General Assembly instead. Subsequently, Russia presented to Council members an alternative text that contained several components from the one co-authored by France and Mexico—including the call for unhindered humanitarian access—but omitted references proposed by other members that Moscow had deemed unacceptable. The Council failed to adopt that draft, which received two favourable votes (China and Russia) and 13 abstentions, yet again illustrating the difficulty of treating humanitarian access as an exclusively technical issue divorced from political considerations.<sup>136</sup>

Finally, the Council has confronted what might arguably be the most severe challenges to humanitarian access in recent years in Gaza, where large-scale hostilities and Israeli-imposed restrictions drastically impeded aid delivery following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas

war in October 2023. Between then and October 2025, the Council failed to adopt nine draft resolutions on the conflict—either due to insufficient votes or vetoes cast by permanent members—most of which contained provisions variously calling for humanitarian ceasefires, humanitarian pauses, the establishment of humanitarian corridors, or the lifting of restrictions on the entry of humanitarian aid. During the same period, the Council did manage to adopt four resolutions on the situation, but they either faced serious compliance challenges or went completely unheeded.

At the time of writing, the most recent product on Gaza was resolution 2803 of 17 November 2025, which endorsed a US-brokered peace framework, welcoming the establishment of a Board of Peace (BoP) as a transitional governance administration in Gaza and authorising the BoP to deploy the ISF to the enclave. The resolution underscored the “importance of the full resumption of humanitarian aid...in a manner consistent with relevant international legal principles” and mandated the ISF to protect civilians and humanitarian operations. It also included the US peace plan as an annex, which stipulated that the “[e]ntry of distribution and aid in the Gaza Strip will proceed without interference from the two parties” through the UN and its agencies. Although the humanitarian situation in Gaza subsequently improved somewhat, it remained critical at the time of writing, as intermittent violence continued and restrictions impeding delivery remained in place.<sup>137</sup>

Against this backdrop, the Council’s efforts to facilitate safe and unimpeded humanitarian access in Gaza largely reflects the general pattern of failed, delayed, or partially implemented decisions that has become characteristic of the Council’s PoC engagement in numerous contexts. Yet the file also serves as an especially stark example of the increasing politicisation and instrumentalisation of humanitarian access.

This trend has unfolded through several related developments. In October 2024, the Israeli parliament adopted two laws restricting the operations of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). One piece of legislation prohibited Israeli officials from having contact with UNRWA, while the other prohibited UNRWA from operating on Israeli territory, which the country interprets as encompassing the OPT, including East Jerusalem. Since March 2025, Israel has also blocked UNRWA from directly bringing humanitarian personnel and aid into the Gaza Strip.<sup>138</sup>

In part to replace the Agency, Israel and the US subsequently backed the establishment of a private entity called the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF), which bypassed the UN-run aid delivery architecture by handing out aid at distribution points administered by US contractors and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). These security entities routinely fired at crowds gathering at GHF sites, where over 850 people were killed between May and August 2025.<sup>139</sup> The UN and its partners refused to participate in the mechanism, calling it a “militarized distribution system” that did not adhere to humanitarian principles or replicate the scale or

135 Security Council Report. “In Hindsight: The Demise of the Syria Cross-border Aid Mechanism”. (August 2023 Monthly Forecast, 31 July 2023), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2023-08/in-hindsight-the-demise-of-the-syria-cross-border-aid-mechanism.php>>.

136 Security Council Report. “Ukraine: Vote on Draft Humanitarian Resolution”. (What’s in Blue, 23 March 2022), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2022/03/ukraine-vote-on-draft-humanitarian-resolution.php>>.

137 See e.g. Oxfam (9 April 2026). Six Months In, Gaza Ceasefire Is Failing: Humanitarian Scorecard, <<https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/six-months-in-gaza-ceasefire-is-failing-humanitarian-scorecard/>>.

138 See e.g. UNRWA (11 March 2026). “UNRWA Situation Report #212 on the Humanitarian Crisis in the Gaza Strip and the Occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem”, <<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-212-humanitarian-crisis-gaza-strip-and-occupied-west-bank>>.

139 OHCHR (5 August 2025). “UN Experts Call for Immediate Dismantling of Gaza Humanitarian Foundation”, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/un-experts-call-immediate-dismantling-gaza-humanitarian-foundation>>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

accessibility of established aid delivery channels.<sup>140</sup> The GHF eventually suspended operations in November 2025.<sup>141</sup>

In December 2025, new Israeli registration requirements for international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) went into effect. According to the OPT Humanitarian Country Team, the new process “fundamentally jeopardizes the continuation of humanitarian operations throughout the OPT”, relying on “vague, arbitrary, and highly politicized criteria” that impose requirements that humanitarian organisations cannot meet without violating international legal obligations or compromising core humanitarian principles.<sup>142</sup> Initially, INGOs that did not comply with the requirements—which include established aid providers such as Médecins Sans Frontières, Save the Children, and the Norwegian Refugee Council—were told to cease operations by 1 March, but the Israeli Supreme Court had temporarily halted the ban at the time of writing.<sup>143</sup>

In Council meetings, the majority of members have expressed concern at these measures compromising humanitarian principles and the effectiveness, integrity, and safety of aid delivery in Gaza. They have called on Israel to abide by its IHL obligations, the Council’s own pronouncements, and the October 2025 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which found that Israel is obligated to allow UN agencies to provide humanitarian aid in Gaza.<sup>144</sup> Yet unlike in the case of Syria, the Council has not taken any coercive measures to enforce these calls. While resolution 2803 was arguably adopted under Chapter VII of the Charter, and did call for the resumption of humanitarian aid through UN agencies and “cooperating organizations” in a manner consistent with international legal principles, the Council did not take any further action to reverse Israeli restrictions on UNRWA and INGOs or their displacement by the GHF.<sup>145</sup> Rather, when vetoing a draft resolution authored by the Council’s ten elected members (E10) in June 2025, the US said that it opposed the text in part because it did not express support for the Foundation.<sup>146</sup>

In conclusion, the Council’s engagement on humanitarian access illustrates how the issue has become increasingly difficult to address as a distinct protection concern. While members have continued to recognise the centrality of humanitarian access to the protection of civilians and have agreed on a range of operational and thematic measures to facilitate it, their approaches diverge on key questions regarding sovereignty, consent, and the appropriate framework for humanitarian action. These differences have shaped negotiations across multiple files, from Syria and Ukraine to Gaza, where efforts to secure access have been closely tied to broader political disputes. At the same time, developments on the ground—particularly in Gaza—demonstrate how humanitarian assistance is increasingly restricted,

reconfigured, or instrumentalised by conflict parties, challenging established delivery mechanisms and humanitarian principles. In this environment, the Council has struggled not only to ensure sustained and principled humanitarian access in specific situations but also to maintain a shared understanding that such access should remain insulated from political and military objectives.

#### ii.c. Peace Operations

UN peace operations have long served as one of the Security Council’s most direct operational tools for protecting civilians in armed conflict. Since the Council first introduced explicit protection language in UNAMSIL’s mandate in 1999, PoC has become a central component of many contemporary operations, evolving from a discrete military task to a cross-cutting strategic objective. A total of 16 PKOs have been explicitly mandated to protect civilians, five of which are operational today, comprising over 90 percent of deployed peacekeepers.<sup>147</sup> While recognising the primary responsibility of host states for the protection of civilians, the Council has mandated these missions to deter attacks against civilians through protective presence and patrols, monitor and report on violations of IHL and abuses of IHL, support local protection mechanisms, and facilitate humanitarian access, among other tasks. Over time, these mandates have become one of the principal ways in which the Council has sought to translate its normative commitments on civilian protection into operational practice on the ground.

While impactful in many contexts, this effort has faced a variety of longstanding challenges. Overly broad Council mandates, inadequate resources, and compromised host-state consent are recurring obstacles that have hampered the ability of missions to effectively fulfil their protection tasks. Increasingly complex threat environments characterised by the proliferation of conflict parties and internationalisation of conflict dynamics; the accelerated spread of harmful information and new weapons technologies; and the overlapping presence of transnational criminal organisations and private military actors pose additional difficulties demanding further adaptation.

At the same time, the current geopolitical environment has ushered peacekeeping into a period of political retrenchment and financial downsizing, limiting missions’ ability to confront these challenges and raising broader questions about the future role of peacekeeping as a core pillar of the Council’s PoC architecture. It has been over a decade since the Council established its most recent PKO—the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA)—in 2014. Between then and 2020, operations in Côte d’Ivoire (2017), Haiti (2017), and Liberia (2018) wound down and

140 OCHA OPT (28 May 2025). “Statement by the Humanitarian Country Team of the Occupied Palestinian Territory – on Gaza”, <<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/statement-humanitarian-country-team-occupied-palestinian-territory-gaza>>.

141 Julia Frankel and Natalie Melzer (24 November 2025). “US-backed aid company in Gaza shuts operations as Israel’s military and defense minister clash”. Associated Press, <<https://apnews.com/article/gaza-humanitarian-foundation-shuts-down-dce3d8f08c814839bdeef6aed31bfe3d>>.

142 OCHA OPT (17 December 2025). “UN Agencies and NGOs Call for Immediate Lifting of Impediments to Humanitarian Access and NGO Operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory”, <<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/un-agencies-and-ngos-call-immediate-lifting-impediments-humanitarian-access-and-ngo-operations-occupied>>.

143 “Aid Groups in Gaza and West Bank Thrown Lifeline as Israel Court Pauses Ban Threat” (27 February 2026). BBC News, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd6z382de8yo>>.

144 ICJ (22 October 2025). Advisory Opinion on the “Obligations of Israel in relation to the Presence and Activities of the United Nations, Other International Organizations and Third States in and in relation to the Occupied Palestinian Territory”, <<https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/196/196-20251022-adv-01-00-en.pdf>>.

145 A comparison of the Council’s approaches to humanitarian access in Syria and Gaza is illustrative. In both situations, the Council adopted textually ambiguous resolutions that did not explicitly invoke Chapter VII, but which contained other language typically associated with that authority, including a determination of a threat to peace and stability. The determinations were phrased differently in the two situations, however. Resolution 2165 establishing the Syria cross-border mechanism determined that “the deteriorating humanitarian situation constitutes a threat to peace and security in the region”, while resolution 2803 determined that “the situation in the Gaza Strip threatens the regional peace and the security of neighboring states” (added emphasis). As such, were the Council to adopt coercive measures to safeguard humanitarian access in Gaza, it may seek to do so on the basis of a more tailored determination similar to resolution 2165.

146 UNSC 9929th Meeting Record (4 June 2025) (S/PV.9929).

147 UN DPO and McGill University (October 2024). 25 Years of Protecting Civilians through UN Peacekeeping: Taking Stock and Looking Forward, p.1, [footnote 4], <[https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/25\\_years\\_of\\_protecting\\_civilians\\_through\\_un\\_peacekeeping\\_-\\_taking\\_stock\\_and\\_looking\\_back\\_0.pdf](https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/25_years_of_protecting_civilians_through_un_peacekeeping_-_taking_stock_and_looking_back_0.pdf)>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

saw their tasks transferred to the host government, a special political mission (SPM), or the UN Country Team (UNCT). Since 2020, the Council has decided to terminate additional PKOs in Sudan/Darfur (2020), Mali (2023), and Lebanon (2025) and to request the operation in the DRC (2023) to begin a phased withdrawal. It has also decided to draw down SPMs—which do not offer physical protection in the way PKOs do but may support other protection functions—in Sudan (2023), Iraq (2024), Somalia (2024), and Yemen (2026). Moreover, the UN’s current liquidity crisis has affected the operational capacity of remaining operations, forcing them to implement contingency measures that include a 15 percent cut in expenditures and the repatriation of 25 percent of uniformed personnel.<sup>148</sup> This has had a detrimental impact on the implementation of mandated PoC tasks by forcing operations to scale back their protective presence and cut PoC-related personnel and programmatic activities.<sup>149</sup>

As such, while the Council has continued to reaffirm the centrality of PoC in relevant peacekeeping mandates, the number of missions carrying such mandates has declined, and the posture of some remaining missions has become less robust. Arguably more concerning, withdrawals since 2020 have increasingly been driven by political tensions between host governments and the UN or the priorities of specific Council members rather than improved conditions for civilians on the ground, contributing to a shrinking UN footprint at a time when civilian harm in armed conflict remains widespread and, in several contexts, is worsening. This is fuelling an increasingly stark contradiction: the Council continues to describe protection as a core peacekeeping task even as it accepts, and in some cases formalises, the withdrawal of missions from volatile environments where national authorities may not yet be able or willing to assume comparable protection responsibilities, or may themselves be perpetrating violence against civilians.

The first major reconfiguration in the post-2020 period took place in Sudan following the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and the country’s subsequent political transition. In June 2020, the Council extended the mandate of the UN–AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID)—a large PKO with a PoC mandate—until 31 December. It simultaneously established a follow-on presence, mandating UNITAMS as a smaller SPM to start delivering its strategic objectives by 1 January 2021.<sup>150</sup> In December 2020, amid continuing violence in Darfur and concerns that UNITAMS would not be fully operational by the end of the year, Germany and the UK—the co-penholders on Sudan—initially sought a further extension of UNAMID’s mandate until June 2021. The A3 and some permanent members opposed this approach, however, as did the Sudanese government, which reaffirmed its position that UNAMID’s mandate should terminate on 31 December 2020 and that it would assume full responsibility for the protection of civilians in line with its national PoC plan that it had submitted to the Council earlier that year.<sup>151</sup>

The co-penholders ultimately accommodated this timeframe in the resulting resolution, which took note of Sudan’s PoC commitments and urged the government to fully and swiftly implement its national plan and to protect civilians in Darfur in accordance with IHL and IHRL.<sup>152</sup> In a 2021 transition evaluation, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) found that “[r]isks related to humanitarian and protection needs in Darfur remained high and unaddressed” during the transition period, and although UNAMID was mandated to retain reserve PoC capacity to respond to “in extremis” situations threatening civilians in vacated areas, the mission’s reduced capacity and presence limited its ability to do so, as seen during the December 2019 massacre of civilians in El Geneina, West Darfur.<sup>153</sup>

In September 2021, the Council recognised the risks associated with premature drawdowns through the unanimous adoption of resolution 2594 on peacekeeping transitions. The resolution defined transitions as “a strategic process which builds towards a reconfiguration of the strategy, footprint, and capacity of the [UN] in a way that supports peacebuilding objectives and the development of a sustainable peace”. It acknowledged that such reconfigurations may increase risks for civilians, urged the early development of national plans and benchmarks for civilian protection, and stressed the need for an appropriately configured UN presence with the necessary capacities to support PoC during transitions. As examples of such support, the resolution highlighted assistance in establishing early warning and rapid response systems; deploying mobile monitoring teams; facilitating local crisis mediation; utilising communications and outreach strategies with populations at risk of violence; advancing conflict prevention, mitigation, and reconciliation; building trust between state authorities and local communities; and supporting community policing initiatives or other methods of unarmed civilian protection.

Notwithstanding these guidelines, political considerations rather than developments on the ground have remained a primary driver of subsequent drawdowns. After two military coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, the country’s new transitional authorities imposed restrictions on the freedom of movement of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and objected to the mission’s human rights reporting, which had implicated the government—as well as the Russian private security company Wagner Group—in abuses.<sup>154</sup> This culminated in the Malian foreign minister’s call for the “immediate withdrawal” of the mission at a June 2023 Council meeting.<sup>155</sup> France—the penholder on the file—had been negotiating a mandate renewal based on options for the mission’s reconfiguration but quickly pivoted to drafting a resolution ending the mission entirely. While Council members broadly recognised the severe security, humanitarian, and political risks that MINUSMA’s departure would pose, and most agreed that the withdrawal itself was undesirable, they

148 Security Council Report. “In Hindsight: UN Peace Operations at a Crossroads”. (March 2026 Monthly Forecast, 2 March 2026), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-03/in-hindsight-un-peace-operations-at-a-crossroads.php>>.

149 Interview with UN official (March 2026); see also Security Council Report. “UN Peacekeeping Operations: Closed Consultations”. (What’s in Blue, 28 April 2026), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2026/04/un-peacekeeping-operations-closed-consultations-2.php>>.

150 Security Council Report. “Resolutions on the UN/AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) and the Establishment of a Follow-on Mission”. (What’s in Blue, 3 June 2020), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2020/06/resolutions-on-the-un-au-hybrid-operation-in-darfur-unamid-and-the-establishment-of-a-follow-on-mission.php>>.

151 Letter dated 21 May 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Sudan to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2020/429).

152 UNSC Resolution 2559 (22 December 2020) (S/RES/2559), [4].

153 Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on Evaluation of the Relevance, Effectiveness and Efficiency of the African Union–United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur in Supporting Transition from Peacekeeping to Peacebuilding in Darfur in Collaboration with United Nations Country Team (1 March 2021) (A/75/787), [37-38].

154 See e.g. Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali (1 June 2023) (S/2023/402), [19].

155 UNSC 9350th Meeting Record (16 June 2023) (S/PV.9350).

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

also recognised that a peacekeeping mission could not continue without host-state consent. As such, the following negotiations were less about whether MINUSMA should withdraw than about how quickly and under what conditions the Council could manage a forced exit.<sup>156</sup> In the resulting resolution, adopted two weeks after Mali's request, the Council immediately terminated the mission's mandate and requested it to complete its drawdown and withdrawal by the end of 2023.<sup>157</sup> While the resolution did authorise the mission to continue responding to threats of violence against civilians and prioritise the safety of UN personnel during the drawdown period, the compressed timeline exacerbated security challenges from armed groups, which resumed fighting and carried out large-scale attacks against civilians and peacekeepers during the transitional phase.<sup>158</sup>

Around the same time and again acting on a request from host-state authorities, the Council decided to begin MONUSCO's phased drawdown and endorse its disengagement plan, despite the country's deteriorating security situation. As a result, the mission withdrew from South Kivu province in June 2024 and was subsequently expected to draw down from North Kivu and Ituri. However, the persistent threat of armed groups prompted the DRC to change course ahead of the next mandate renewal and instead propose a flexible approach, focusing on withdrawing from pacified areas rather than following the original phased plan. Council members supported this approach, and the resulting mandate called for a tailored strategy for a gradual, responsible, and sustainable withdrawal, considering evolving conflict dynamics and protection risks.<sup>159</sup> During negotiations on the most recent mandate renewal in December 2025, which took place following renewed fighting in both North Kivu and South Kivu provinces and the capture of several areas by the M23 armed group, the US apparently advocated for the mission's redeployment to South Kivu, potentially reversing the Council's decision from two years earlier and illustrating the precariousness of that initial withdrawal. China and Russia opposed this move, however, resulting in dense compromise language specifying that the mission's area of operation is limited to North Kivu and Ituri provinces, except when needed to support ceasefire monitoring and verification activities in South Kivu as mandated by the Council and when the mission determines that the situation permits, at which time MONUSCO is requested to notify the Council in writing.<sup>160</sup>

Most recently, the Council agreed to draw down the UN

Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). During mandate negotiations in August 2025, the US—reflective of its more selective approach to UN peacekeeping under the second administration of President Trump—demanded a clear date for the mission's termination and signalled its readiness to veto the mandate renewal if it did not contain such a date. No other members had approached the negotiations seeking the mission's closure, however, and several believed that the conditions on the ground required it to remain fully operational for at least another year to support the Lebanese government and armed forces in their efforts to disarm Hezbollah and consolidate state presence in the south of the country. The result was a compromise that tempered US insistence on a set date for the mission's exit, with a final, longer-than-usual mandate renewal (16 months) reflecting the other members' concern that an accelerated drawdown could have undermined the process of Lebanon achieving full control over its territory.<sup>161</sup> The final resolution authorised several tasks for UNIFIL to fulfil during the drawdown and withdrawal period, including to "contribute to the protection of civilians and the safe civilian-led delivery of humanitarian assistance, within the limits of its capacities".<sup>162</sup> After the adoption, renewed hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah in the context of the ongoing Middle East crisis had killed at least 2,500 people at the time of writing, including civilians and six UNIFIL peacekeepers,<sup>163</sup> prompting some observers to question the viability of the mission even for the remainder of its final mandate period.<sup>164</sup>

Similar dynamics also extend to the Council's handling of certain SPMs. Mandated under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, these missions are not equipped to provide physical protection in the way that PKOs mandated under Chapter VII are, and the UN Secretariat has not developed equivalent doctrinal guidance outlining protection concepts and activities in these contexts. Nonetheless, SPMs may contribute to civilian protection through a variety of means, including political engagement with conflict parties, building the capacity of host-state authorities, monitoring and reporting on human rights violations, and establishing deterrence through presence.<sup>165</sup>

Sudan again provides the first illustrative example. The Council mandated UNITAMS to support civilian protection efforts, including through tasks such as assisting host authorities in implementing their national protection strategy, deploying mobile monitoring teams, and mediating local conflicts. After civil war broke out in 2023, however, interrupting the country's political transition, the authorities

156 Security Council Report. "Mali: Vote on Resolution Ending the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali". (What's in Blue, 29 June 2023), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/06/mali-vote-on-resolution-ending-the-un-multidimensional-integrated-stabilization-mission-in-mali.php>>.

157 UNSC Resolution 2690 (30 June 2023) (S/RES/2690).

158 See e.g. Security Council Report. UN Transitions in a Fractured Multilateral Environment, Research Report, no.4. (8 December 2023), p.4, <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/research-reports/un-transitions-in-a-fractured-multilateral-environment.php>>; Security Council Report. "Mali: Meeting under 'Any other Business' on the Withdrawal of MINUSMA". (What's in Blue, 19 October 2023), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/10/mali-meeting-under-any-other-business-on-the-withdrawal-of-minusma.php>>.

159 Security Council Report. "Democratic Republic of the Congo: Vote on MONUSCO Mandate Renewal". (What's in Blue, 20 December 2024), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/12/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-vote-on-monusco-mandate-renewal-2.php>>.

160 Security Council Report. "Democratic Republic of the Congo: Vote on MONUSCO Mandate Renewal". (What's in Blue, 19 December 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/12/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-vote-on-monusco-mandate-renewal-3.php>>.

161 Security Council Report. "UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL): Vote on Final Mandate Renewal and Drawdown". (What's in Blue, 28 August 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/08/un-interim-force-in-lebanon-unifil-vote-on-final-mandate-renewal-and-drawdown.php>>.

162 UNSC Resolution 2790 (28 August 2025) (S/RES/2790).

163 Euan Ward and Sarah Chaayto (24 April 2026). "Escalating Clashes Test Newly Extended Israel-Lebanon Truce". The New York Times, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/24/world/middleeast/israel-lebanon-fighting-ceasefire.html>>;

Gavin Blackburn (24 April 2026). "Indonesian peacekeeper dies of wounds suffered in Lebanon last month, UNIFIL says". Euronews, <<https://www.euronews.com/2026/04/24/indonesian-peacekeeper-dies-of-wounds-suffered-in-lebanon-last-month-unifil-says>>.

164 Interview with UN official (March 2026).

165 See e.g. Julie Gregory and Elias Yousif (21 October 2025). Verifying Peace, Promoting Protection: The Experience of Colombia's UN Verification Mission. Stimson Center, <<https://www.stimson.org/2025/verifying-peace-promoting-protection-the-experience-of-colombias-un-verification-mission/>>; Julie Gregory (9 October 2024). Civilian Protection in Sudan: Emerging Lessons from UNITAMS. Stimson Center, <<https://www.stimson.org/2024/civilian-protection-in-sudan-emerging-lessons-from-unitams/>>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

requested UNITAMS' immediate termination.<sup>166</sup> Council members had initially sought additional time to consider the findings of an independent strategic review regarding the UN's engagement in the country's new political and security context, but the host state's request effectively foreclosed those discussions. The negotiations that followed focused largely on how quickly the mission should close, resulting in a resolution that immediately terminated the mission's mandate and requested it to transfer its tasks to the UNCT within three months.<sup>167</sup> Since then, escalating hostilities, conflict-induced famine, and the siege of El Fasher have turned the country into one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes in the world.

The Council has also decided to shut down SPMs in Iraq and Yemen, albeit under more controlled circumstances. In Iraq, the decision followed a request by the government to close the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and transfer its residual tasks to the UNCT over a 19-month period. An independent strategic review found such a reconfiguration feasible, and it was generally supported by Council members on the grounds that Iraq's political and security situation had improved sufficiently to justify such a transition.<sup>168</sup> During the final mandate period authorised by resolution 2732 of 31 May 2024, the Council instructed UNAMI to retain several protection-related functions as priority tasks, including supporting the return of IDPs, promoting accountability and the protection of human rights, and strengthening child protection efforts. The mission closed as planned on 31 December 2025.

The situation concerning the UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA) in Yemen was more contentious, though it still allowed for substantive Council discussions. Among other tasks, the mission was mandated to work with the government of Yemen and the Houthis rebel group to support the security of Hodeidah city and its surrounding ports, which handle the vast majority of Yemen's commercial imports and humanitarian aid. Despite the importance of these ports to Yemen's fragile humanitarian situation, the US argued that the mission's operational relevance and viability had diminished amid Houthi-imposed restrictions on its freedom of movement and the broader deterioration of the political and security environment surrounding the Hodeidah Agreement.<sup>169</sup> Most other Council members eventually accepted this position, and the Council decided in January 2026 to draw down the mission within two months and transfer its remaining functions to the Office of the Special Envoy for Yemen, which aligned with one of the options presented by the Secretary-General in a previously requested mandate review. China and Russia still opposed the move, however, abstaining on the resolution and warning that the mission's closure would remove a stabilising monitoring presence in a context where the humanitarian situation remains critical.<sup>170</sup>

The overall picture that emerges from these examples is mixed. Only the case of UNAMI appears to approximate a model transition as envisioned by resolution 2594, characterised by substantial (albeit fragile) political, security, and humanitarian gains, a functional relationship between the UN and host government, a relatively unified Council, and a long-term planning horizon that retained humanitarian and human rights-related tasks during the drawdown period and allowed for the orderly transfer of residual tasks to the UNCT.

By contrast, the Council's experiences with UNAMID, MINUSMA, and UNITAMS illustrate the body's limited scope for action when political shifts precipitate a sudden withdrawal of host-state consent. Although consent of the parties is an established principle of peacekeeping that host governments have long utilised as a source of leverage to influence missions in line with their perceived interests,<sup>171</sup> present circumstances characterised by geopolitical polarisation, Council gridlock, and the emergence of alternative security providers seem to have further emboldened certain host governments to withdraw consent wholesale in volatile contexts where the reputational risks associated with ongoing hostilities and threats to civilians may have otherwise encouraged them to maintain at least limited cooperation with the UN field presence. While such considerations do seem to have prevailed in the DRC, where the government amended its request for MONUSCO's phased drawdown in light of persistent security risks, some observers contend that this shift was prompted primarily by the government's perception that the mission's continued presence would serve its political and security interests against increasing pressure from the Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group.<sup>172</sup>

Meanwhile, the terminations of UNIFIL and to a lesser extent UNMHA reflect the parallel ability of major powers to shape certain Council outcomes in line with their national priorities. To varying degrees, both those drawdowns were initiated at the behest of the US despite continued instability, threats to civilians, and humanitarian challenges in those contexts, which remained concerns for other Council members. Yet their need to preserve political capital in their bilateral relationship with the US, as well as the structure of Council decision-making that benefits the veto-wielding permanent members—particularly those in favour of termination, which is the default outcome unless agreement is reached on a mandate renewal—nonetheless resulted in drawdowns in those cases.

Finally, the closure of traditional UN peace operations has increasingly shifted attention towards partnerships with non-UN deployments led by regional or ad hoc coalitions, which some consider to be more responsive and flexible arrangements. Although such partnerships are not a new phenomenon,<sup>173</sup> the trend appears to have accelerated in recent years as political and financial considerations

166 In an April 2026 interview, one UN official expressed the view that UNITAMS had in fact been a "proximate cause" of the conflict by insisting on advancing security sector reform (SSR) in a manner that "kept confronting the [armed factions] with the fact that they couldn't agree" on integration.

167 Security Council Report. "Sudan: Vote on Resolution Ending the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan". (What's in Blue, 1 December 2023), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/12/sudan-vote-on-resolution-ending-the-un-integrated-transition-assistance-mission-in-sudan.php>>.

168 Security Council Report. "Iraq: Vote on UNAMI Mandate Renewal". (What's in Blue, 31 May 2024), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/05/iraq-vote-on-unami-mandate-renewal-4.php>>.

169 Security Council Report. "Yemen: Votes on Draft Resolutions Extending UNMHA's Mandate and the Houthi Red Sea Attacks Reporting Requirement". (What's in Blue, 12 July 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/07/yemen-votes-on-draft-resolutions-extending-unmhhas-mandate-and-the-houthi-red-sea-attacks-reporting-requirement.php>>.

170 Security Council Report. "Yemen: Vote on Final Mandate Renewal of UNMHA". (What's in Blue, 25 January 2026), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2026/01/yemen-vote-on-final-mandate-renewal-of-unmha.php>>.

171 See e.g. Sofía Sebastián and Aditi Gorur (March 2018). UN Peacekeeping and Host-State Consent: How Missions Navigate Relationships with Governments. Stimson Center, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/un-peacekeeping-host-state-consent-how-missions-navigate-relationships-governments>>; UNDP and McGill University (October 2024). 25 Years of Protecting Civilians through UN Peacekeeping: Taking Stock and Looking Forward, p.19–20.

172 Interview with UN official (March 2026).

173 The Security Council has regularly authorised such deployments since the 1990s. Early examples include Kuwait (Operation Desert Storm, 1991), Somalia (UNITAF, 1992), Haiti (Operation Uphold Democracy, 1994), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (IFOR/SFOR, 1995). The Council continued to grant such authorisations in the 2000s and 2010s, including AUPSOs in contexts such as Somalia (AMISOM, ATMIS, AUSSOM), Sudan/Darfur (AMIS), Mali (AFISMA), and the CAR (MISCA), several of which transitioned into UN operations. The Council also authorised the regional military coalition in West Africa known as the G5 Sahel Joint Force (comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger).

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

have limited the establishment of new UN operations. An important thematic decision in this regard was Security Council resolution 2719 of 21 December 2023, which determined that AU Peace Support Operations (AUPSOs) authorised by the Council should receive up to 75 percent of their annual budgets through UN-assessed contributions. The AU had been seeking such support since 2007, and the adoption of resolution 2719 reflected increased recognition of the organisation's proactive role on matters of peace and security in Africa as well as the need for adequate, sustainable, and predictable funding to support this role in contemporary peacekeeping contexts. Importantly, resolution 2719 stipulates PoC as a condition for such support, emphasising that AUPSOs accessing UN-assessed contributions should ensure that protection is prioritised in the operation's planning, concept of operations, rules of engagement, and other relevant policies.<sup>174</sup>

The Council had not yet applied this framework at the time of writing, however, in part due to opposition from the US. Instead, the Council has authorised the deployment of ad hoc forces to two situations on its agenda, both funded by voluntary contributions. In Haiti, the Council first authorised the deployment of the Kenya-led Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission in October 2023,<sup>175</sup> which it eventually transitioned into the GSF in September 2025.<sup>176</sup> While the GSF does not have an explicit PoC mandate, its Council authorisation—co-penned by Panama and the US—requests it to deploy Child and Woman Protection Advisers and to take child protection and the protection of “other vulnerable groups” into account in the planning and conduct of its operations. In Gaza—as discussed above—the US led negotiations on resolution 2803, which authorised the BoP to deploy the ISF and mandated it to “protect civilians, including humanitarian operations”, among other tasks. It had not yet deployed at the time of writing.

While these mechanisms may be more politically palatable than UN operations in the current Council environment, and could prove more operationally agile, they also pose a distinct set of challenges. During Council negotiations on both authorisations, members had concerns about the perceived lack of clarity regarding the forces' terms of reference, composition, force generation, and compliance frameworks—all of which are highly institutionalised in UN settings.<sup>177</sup> When it comes to PoC specifically, these gaps are not merely procedural but may have direct implications on the ground. Unlike UN operations, non-UN forces—especially ad hoc ones—may lack robust, system-wide frameworks for protecting civilians, including integrated civilian–military planning, dedicated protection capacities, regular training, and established accountability mechanisms. Further, such arrangements can at times blur lines of responsibility, challenge the principle of impartiality, or implicate international actors in violations committed by partner forces. Moreover, uneven adherence to IHL, limited transparency in command structures, and

weaker oversight can heighten risks of harm to civilians and constrain effective monitoring and reporting of violations. In the absence of clear compliance and accountability frameworks, these missions may struggle to build trust with local populations or to deliver consistent protection outcomes, potentially exacerbating rather than mitigating existing protection concerns. Recent reports of sexual violence committed by MSS forces in Haiti exemplify these risks.<sup>178</sup>

The Secretary-General's forthcoming review of the future of UN peace operations—requested by member states in the Pact for the Future—may inform the Council's deliberations on several of these questions concerning PoC. The review is unfolding amid diverging positions within the Secretariat itself, however, with different views on whether and how all peace operations should contribute to protecting civilians. In a March 2026 joint letter addressed to the Secretary-General, members of the NGO Working Group on PoC urged the review to “affirm protection as a core aim across all forms of UN peace operations, including peacekeeping operations and special political missions, and articulate how each type of UN presence should contribute to protection in practice”.

Combined, these developments reflect the broader recalibration of the Council's peacekeeping approach to PoC across both UN and non-UN modalities. On the one hand, the Council continues to emphasise protection as a core component of peacekeeping mandates and to refine operational guidance for PKOs that remain deployed, including through tasks related to proactive patrolling, community engagement, monitoring of violations, and facilitation of humanitarian access. On the other hand, the expedited closure or drawdown of several peace operations since 2020—combined with a growing reliance on non-UN deployments that may lack comparable institutional frameworks for protection—points to a politicisation, contraction, and fragmentation of the Council's operational protection architecture. As these transitions continue, and as the Secretary-General's review considers the future shape of UN peace operations, central questions for Council members, host states, and other stakeholders will be how protection responsibilities are sustained once UN missions depart under less orderly circumstances than those envisioned by resolution 2594; whether alternative actors can deliver protection in a consistent, accountable, and impartial manner; and how evolving models of UN engagement can preserve established protection standards and prioritise the objective of protecting civilians in conflict.

#### ii.d. Cross-Cutting Threats

The evolving character of armed conflict has introduced a set of cross-cutting dynamics that both intensify risks to civilians and complicate the Security Council's response. As reflected in recent Secretary-General reporting and Council debates, these trends do not operate in isolation but interact with existing drivers of harm—such

174 UNSC Resolution 2719 (21 December 2023) (S/RES/2719), [12]. In November 2022, the AU, together with the UN and EU, also launched the AU Compliance and Accountability Framework (AUCF) project to enhance the compliance of AUPSOs with IHL and IHRL and raise conduct and discipline standards. See e.g. AU (30 June 2023). “Meeting of the Operational Technical Committee (OTC) of the AU–EU–UN Partnership Project for the Enhancement of the Compliance and Accountability Framework for African Union Peace Support Operations”, <<https://peaceau.org/uploads/statement-director-cmd-otc-au-eu-un-partnership-project...pdf>>.

175 UNSC Resolution 2699 (2 October 2023) (S/RES/2699).

176 UNSC Resolution 2793 (30 September 2025) (S/RES/2793).

177 Security Council Report. “Haiti: Vote on a Draft Resolution Authorising a ‘Gang Suppression Force’ and a UN Support Office”. (What's in Blue, 30 September 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/09/haiti-vote-on-a-draft-resolution-authorising-a-gang-suppression-force-and-a-un-support-office.php>>; Security Council Report. “The Middle East, including the Palestinian Question: Vote on a Draft Resolution to Authorise an International Stabilization Force in Gaza”. (What's in Blue, 16 November 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/11/the-middle-east-including-the-palestinian-question-vote-on-a-draft-resolution-to-authorise-an-international-stabilization-force-in-gaza.php>>.

178 Nathalie Cotrino (13 April 2026). “International Force in Haiti Allegedly Responsible for Sexual Violence”. Human Rights Watch News, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/04/13/international-force-in-haiti-allegedly-responsible-for-sexual-violence>>

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

as protracted conflict, weak compliance with IHL, and constraints on humanitarian access—thereby amplifying their impact. The increasing urbanisation of warfare, the spread of conflict-induced food insecurity, the growing salience of climate-related security risks, and the rapid development and use of new technologies have each contributed to blurring the boundaries between civilian and military spheres and to accelerating the scale and complexity of civilian harm. At the same time, these developments have exposed persistent gaps in the Council’s ability to adapt its tools and ensure compliance as the nature of armed conflict evolves more quickly than the Council is able to respond. The following sub-sections examine these four dynamics in greater detail.

#### *ii.d.i. Urban Warfare*

The increasing urbanisation of armed conflict has significantly reshaped the risks faced by civilians. In a 2021 study, the ICRC estimated that 50 million people were affected by the consequences of urban warfare, a figure that was expected to rise as global urbanisation continues.<sup>179</sup> In these conflict settings, civilians and military objectives are frequently intermingled, heightening the likelihood of harm and complicating compliance with IHL. The destruction of infrastructure and the disruption of interconnected essential services—such as water, electricity, sanitation, and healthcare—can also produce cascading humanitarian effects far beyond the immediate impact of hostilities. As such, even limited damage to interconnected urban systems can trigger widespread service collapse, displacement, and long-term deterioration of living conditions, making urban warfare one of the most complex and consequential contexts for civilian protection.

A highly damaging and increasingly prevalent pattern of civilian harm within urban warfare is the use of EWIPA. Explosive weapons—including artillery, rockets, mortars, UAS, and air-delivered bombs—are often designed for use in open battlefields but are frequently employed in densely populated settings, where their wide-area effects significantly increase the risk of indiscriminate harm. Available data underscores the scale of this pattern: in 2024, explosive weapons caused over 67,000 deaths and injuries globally, with civilians accounting for 89 percent of all casualties, rising to approximately 95 percent when such weapons were used in populated areas. Moreover, 97 percent of all civilian casualties from explosive violence occurred in populated areas, underscoring the strong correlation between urban settings and civilian harm.<sup>180</sup> These dynamics have been observed across multiple conflict contexts, including Gaza—which in 2024 accounted for 39 percent of global civilian casualties from explosive weapons—as well as Lebanon, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine, where the use of EWIPA has driven high levels of civilian death, injury, displacement, and infrastructure destruction.

Beyond immediate casualties, EWIPA generates severe reverberating effects—damaging essential services, contaminating environments with unexploded ordnance, and impeding recovery—making it a central driver of contemporary civilian harm in armed conflict.

In response to these risks, the 2022 Political Declaration on EWIPA—which had been endorsed by 91 countries as at April 2026<sup>181</sup>—commits states to adopt policies and practices to avoid or restrict the use of EWIPA and to strengthen data collection, civilian harm mitigation, and victim assistance. In the Pact for the Future, UN member states also committed to “restrict or refrain from, as appropriate, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas when their use may be expected to cause harm to civilians or civilian objects, including essential civilian infrastructure, schools, medical facilities and places of worship, in accordance with international law.”<sup>182</sup> The Secretary-General has echoed these commitments in his annual PoC reports, encouraging member states to endorse and implement the EWIPA declaration and to adopt policies and practices aimed at avoiding the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.<sup>183</sup>

The Security Council’s consideration of the issue has been more limited. In country-specific products, it has often condemned the “indiscriminate” use of weapons, including explosive weapons or remnants of war, and its impacts on civilians. Specific references to the use of such weapons in populated areas have been rarer, however. Recent instances include resolution 2817 of 11 March 2026 concerning Iran’s attacks on member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Jordan, which deplored the “deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian objects” including the “indiscriminate use of weapons in populated areas and their consequences for the civilian population”. Over the past couple of years, resolutions on Libya,<sup>184</sup> Somalia,<sup>185</sup> and Sudan<sup>186</sup> have contained similar language. Resolution 2573 on the protection of critical civilian infrastructure expressed the Council’s grave concern about “the level of violence against civilians in situations of armed conflicts, including indiscriminate attacks and establishment of military positions in densely populated areas, and their devastating impacts upon civilians”.

The Council has held one thematic meeting dedicated to the issue. During its January 2021 presidency, Norway convened a high-level open debate titled “Wars in cities: protection of civilians in urban settings”.<sup>187</sup> At that session, Council members broadly emphasised the importance of compliance with IHL, in particular the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution in the planning and conduct of military operations in urban environments. Many speakers highlighted the disproportionate impact of urban warfare on civilians, including the widespread destruction of critical infrastructure and the disruption of essential services, and underscored the severe and often long-term humanitarian consequences of fighting in

179 ICRC (January 2022). Explosive Weapons with Wide Area Effects: A Deadly Choice in Populated Areas, p.23, <[https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/document\\_new/file\\_list/ewipa\\_explosive\\_weapons\\_with\\_wide\\_area\\_effect\\_final.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/document_new/file_list/ewipa_explosive_weapons_with_wide_area_effect_final.pdf)>.

180 Action on Armed Violence (21 May 2025). “Explosive Violence Monitor: 2024”, <<https://aoav.org.uk/2025/explosive-violence-monitor-2024/>>.

181 UNODA (2026). “Endorsement: The Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of EWIPA”, <<https://www.ewipa.org/endorsement>>.

182 UNGA Resolution 79/1, “Pact for the Future” (22 September 2024) (A/RES/79/1), [Action 14c].

183 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (15 May 2025) (S/2025/271), [67(b)].

184 The October 2025 renewal of the mandate of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) expressed the Council’s “strong condemnation of the indiscriminate use of weapons in populated areas and their consequences for the civilian population and calling upon all parties to refrain from such practices in accordance with their obligations under international law”. UNSC Resolution 2796 (31 October 2025) (S/RES/2796).

185 The December 2025 renewal of the Al-Shabaab sanctions regime strongly condemned “the reported targeting of civilians by Al-Shabaab as well as its indiscriminate use of explosive weapons, in particular in densely populated areas, and the consequences for the civilian population”. UNSC Resolution 2806 (12 December 2025) (S/RES/2806).

186 The June 2024 resolution demanding the end of the siege of El-Fasher condemned “the use of all force in populated areas against civilians and critical civilian infrastructure”. UNSC Resolution 2736 (13 June 2024) (S/RES/2736).

187 UNSC 8953rd Meeting Record (25 January 2022) (S/PV.8953).

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

densely populated areas. Several members also drew attention to the risks associated with the use of EWIPA and echoed calls for greater efforts to minimise civilian harm in such contexts. Overall, the debate underscored a high degree of rhetorical alignment among Council members on the scale of the challenge and the applicable legal framework. At the same time, concurrent negotiations in Geneva on the political declaration on EWIPA reflected a wider divergence of positions, as some countries advocated for a text that would strengthen relevant international legal obligations and others cautioned against introducing new standards or reinterpretations of IHL, underscoring that existing law—if properly implemented—was sufficient.<sup>188</sup>

This difference of opinion also complicated negotiations on a draft presidential statement on urban warfare that Norway introduced in connection with its open debate. The initial draft text reaffirmed the Council's existing PoC framework and expressed concern about the scale and cumulative impact of harm in urban settings, including damage to critical infrastructure and disruption of essential services. It called on parties to prioritise the protection of civilians in the planning and conduct of military operations in populated areas and encouraged member states to develop policies and practices to prevent and mitigate civilian harm, including its reverberating effects. It also highlighted the importance of humanitarian access, accountability, and coordinated responses to address displacement and maintain essential services. During subsequent negotiations on the text, significant disagreement emerged between some elected members advocating for more progressive language on EWIPA and other members—primarily permanent ones—which opposed provisions that could be interpreted as imposing obligations beyond existing IHL. As this divide persisted, Norway ultimately suspended the negotiations.<sup>189</sup> As such, the Council has yet to adopt a thematic product on this issue.

Another method of warfare associated with urban conflict—but not limited to it—is siege tactics. The ICRC describes such tactics as an attempt to “encircle an enemy’s armed forces, in order to prevent their movement or cut them off from support and supply channels”.<sup>190</sup> While sieges are not explicitly prohibited under IHL, their conduct remains regulated, and civilians in besieged areas retain full legal protections. In particular, parties to conflict are required to allow civilians to leave besieged areas, facilitate evacuations, and allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian relief. The starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is also prohibited. In several recent conflict settings that may be characterised as involving siege-like conditions in urban areas—including Djibo (Burkina Faso), Tigray (Ethiopia), El Fasher (Sudan), Gaza (OPT), and Mariupol (Ukraine)—it appears that one or more of these obligations have been violated.

The Security Council has only approached one of these situations as a siege as such. Resolution 2736 of 13 June 2024 on Sudan demanded that the RSF, a paramilitary group opposed to the Sudanese authorities, halt the siege of El Fasher, the capital of North

Darfur state, and called for an immediate halt to the fighting and for de-escalation in and around El Fasher. The text further condemned the use of all force in populated areas against civilians and critical civilian infrastructure; demanded that all parties to the conflict ensure the protection of civilians, including by allowing civilians wishing to move within and out of El Fasher to safer areas to do so; and called on the parties to allow and facilitate the rapid, safe, unhindered and sustained passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need. It also requested the Secretary-General, in consultation with the Sudanese authorities and regional stakeholders, to make further recommendations for the protection of civilians in Sudan.

The resolution was adopted with 14 votes in favour and an abstention from Russia. It was never implemented, as the RSF maintained and tightened its siege of the city. In October 2024, the Secretary-General issued his recommendations as requested by the resolution.<sup>191</sup> The following month, the UK and Sierra Leone introduced a draft resolution aimed at advancing measures to protect civilians in Sudan. The text condemned the continued assault by the RSF in El Fasher and demanded that it immediately halt all its attacks against civilians in Darfur and elsewhere in the country. It called on both parties to fully implement their commitments in the “Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan”—which was signed by both sides in Jeddah in May 2023<sup>192</sup>—and to immediately cease hostilities and engage in dialogue to agree on steps to de-escalate the conflict with the aim of agreeing to a national ceasefire.

Following contentious negotiations, the draft was ultimately vetoed by Russia, which argued that the resolution would encroach on Sudanese authorities’ primary responsibility for the protection of civilians in Sudan and could also pave the way for the deployment of a new peace operation, which Russia opposed. Illustrating the increasing politicisation of the PoC agenda, Russia further argued that the draft evinced “double standards”, contending that the “very countries that in relation to the Sudan are clamouring for the need for a ceasefire and demanding that both sides end the violence and shield civilians from it, are giving Israel carte blanche to continue escalating in Gaza in disregard of the blatant violations of international humanitarian law by the Israeli army”.<sup>193</sup> The RSF eventually seized full control of El Fasher in October 2025 and carried out a massacre against civilians that a UN fact-finding team concluded bears marks of genocide.<sup>194</sup>

In sum, the Council has recognised several of the most acute protection risks associated with urban warfare—including EWIPA, attacks on critical infrastructure, and siege-like conditions—but has done so only unevenly and largely through adjacent or case-specific formulations rather than a sustained thematic approach. While members have often voiced concern about the severe and cumulative harm caused to civilians in urban settings, those concerns have only rarely translated into agreed language that squarely addresses the methods of warfare driving such harm or into effective follow-up

188 Security Council Report. “Protection of Civilians in Urban Warfare: High-level Open Debate”. (What’s in Blue, 24 January 2022), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2022/01/protection-of-civilians-in-urban-warfare-high-level-open-debate.php>>.

189 March 2026 interviews with diplomats involved in the negotiations. In retrospect, some expressed the opinion that Russia’s impending invasion of Ukraine – which took place the following month – also likely complicated the negotiation climate.

190 ICRC (October 2019). *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts – Recommitting to Protection in Armed Conflict on the 70th Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions*, p.23, <<https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4427-international-humanitarian-law-and-challenges-contemporary-armed-conflicts->>.

191 Report of the Secretary-General on Recommendations for the Protection of Civilians in the Sudan (21 October 2024) (S/2024/759).

192 “Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan” (11 May 2023), <<https://2021-2025.state.gov/jeddah-declaration-of-commitment-to-protect-the-civilians-of-sudan/>>.

193 UNSC 9786th Meeting Record (18 November 2024) (S/PV.9786).

194 OHCHR (19 February 2026). “Sudan: Evidence in El-Fasher Reveals Genocidal Campaign, Targeting Non-Arab Communities, UN Fact-Finding Mission Says”, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/02/sudan-evidence-el-fasher-reveals-genocidal-campaign-targeting-non-arab>>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

when violations occur. As urban conflict has become more prevalent and its humanitarian consequences more devastating, the gap between the scale of the challenge and the Council’s willingness or ability to respond coherently has remained pronounced.

#### *ii. d. ii. Conflict and Hunger*

As noted in the introductory chapter, more than 295 million people faced high levels of acute food insecurity across 53 countries and territories in 2024—13.7 million more than in 2023 and the sixth consecutive annual increase.<sup>195</sup> Conflict was the primary driver of acute food insecurity in 20 countries and territories, affecting nearly 140 million people. Several of these contexts were situations on the Council agenda, including Colombia, the CAR, the DRC, Haiti, Lebanon, Myanmar, the OPT, South Sudan, and Sudan.

Given the prevalence of conflict and hunger in these settings, the Council has regularly engaged with the issue both thematically and in country-specific contexts. Since 2020, it has held high-level open debates on conflict-induced food insecurity during the presidencies of Sierra Leone (November 2025), Guyana (February 2024), Switzerland (May 2023), and the US under the Biden administration (August 2023, May 2022, and March 2021). These meetings have reinforced the Council’s recognition of the link between armed conflict and hunger, while also highlighting the protection of critical civilian infrastructure and essential services as central concerns.

At the November 2025 debate, for example, Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed described the hunger-conflict nexus as a “strategic and existential threat” to international peace and security and urged the Council to treat it as such.<sup>196</sup> Briefers and members highlighted how armed conflict disrupts food systems—through the destruction of agricultural assets, obstruction of humanitarian access, and displacement of populations—while hunger, in turn, fuels instability and violence. At the same time, the debate reflected broad support for the normative framework established by resolution 2417, including the prohibition of starvation as a method of warfare and the need to protect food systems as civilian infrastructure, alongside calls for improved humanitarian access, early warning, and accountability. It also illustrated the Council’s increasing engagement with cross-cutting dimensions of the issue, including the role of climate change, market disruptions, sanctions, and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus—although views differed on the nature and appropriateness of some of these linkages.

In addition to convening thematic meetings, the Council also regularly considers conflict and hunger in country-specific situations based on reporting from a variety of sources. Since 2016, FAO and WFP have submitted joint reports to Council members on countries where severe deteriorations in acute food insecurity are caused primarily by conflict. These reports were initially issued biannually but

have become annual at the request of the Council’s former informal co-focal points on conflict and hunger. They are now supplemented by ad hoc reports, which may be issued in response to rapidly deteriorating situations.<sup>197</sup> By April 2025, FAO and WFP had submitted 15 joint reports to Council members.

Following the adoption of resolution 2417 in 2018, the Secretary-General has also included updates on conflict and hunger in his annual PoC report and as part of his regular reporting to the Council on country-specific situations. Additionally, as requested by the resolution, OCHA has alerted the Council to risks of conflict-induced famine and food insecurity through the issuance of white notes. At the time of writing, OCHA had submitted nine such notes—which draw on technical information provided by FAO and WFP—covering Burkina Faso, the DRC, Tigray/Ethiopia, Gaza, Haiti, northeast Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, and Yemen. The Council has convened to consider each of these notifications, although some have proven politically sensitive. Notably, some African members have opposed formally discussing situations of which the Council was not already seized out of concern that doing so would serve as a pretext for placing the situation on the Council’s agenda. Consequently, Council members considered the white notes that included Burkina Faso (dated 8 June 2023) and Tigray/Ethiopia (dated 25 May 2021) in the IID format.<sup>198</sup>

Council discussions have also highlighted gaps in implementation. A recurring challenge has been the disconnect between early warning and early action. Although resolution 2417 requires the Secretary-General to report “swiftly” on situations of concern, recent hunger crises such as those in Ethiopia, Gaza, and Sudan illustrate that OCHA’s alerts may reach the Council after acute food insecurity has already emerged, fostering a perception among some observers that decisions on whether and when to issue a white note may be influenced not only by the availability of reliable information but also by political considerations. This has prompted criticism from some Council members: under the Biden administration, for instance, the US described the white notes as “irregular” and “delayed”, and called for the regular submission of biannual notes as a means of “depoliticizing the issue” and ensuring that the Council received timely information on situations of concern.<sup>199</sup> In March 2021, the Council failed to agree on a US-proposed presidential statement that would have established such a reporting cycle due in part to opposition from China, India, and Russia, which argued that existing reporting was sufficient.<sup>200</sup> In August 2023, a similar provision was struck from another US-proposed presidential statement that was ultimately adopted.<sup>201</sup>

More recently, the Council has convened to consider other reporting on specific situations of conflict-induced food insecurity. At the request of the informal co-focal points on conflict and hunger, the Council held open briefings on Sudan in January 2025 and on Gaza in November 2024 following findings by the IPC that famine had

195 Food Security Information Network and Global Network Against Food Crises (May 2025). 2025 Global Report on Food Crises.

196 UNSC 10045th Meeting Record (17 November 2025) (S/PV.10045).

197 See e.g., FAO and WFP (February 2024). Monitoring Food Security in Palestine and the Sudan: A Joint FAO/WFP Update for the Members of the United Nations Security Council, Issue No. 13 – Special Edition, <<https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/6c05a0cb-d1b8-463e-be54-42c67468e1ee/content>>.

198 See Security Council Report. “Ethiopia (Tigray): Informal Interactive Dialogue on the Humanitarian Situation”. (What’s in Blue, 14 June 2021) <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/06/ethiopia-tigray-informal-interactive-dialogue-on-the-humanitarian-situation.php>>; Security Council Report. “Conflict and Hunger: Informal Interactive Dialogue on Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Haiti”. (What’s in Blue, 27 July 2023), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/07/conflict-and-hunger-informal-interactive-dialogue-on-burkina-faso-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-and-haiti.php>>.

199 UNSC 9327th Meeting Record (23 May 2023) (S/PV.9327).

200 Security Council Report. “Negotiations on Conflict and Food Security Draft Presidential Statement”. (What’s in Blue, 18 March 2021), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/03/negotiations-on-conflict-and-food-security-draft-presidential-statement.php>>.

201 Statement by the President of the Security Council (3 August 2023) (S/PRST/2023/4). For details on the negotiations, see Security Council Report. “Presidential Statement on Conflict and Food Insecurity”. (What’s in Blue, 3 August 2023), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/08/presidential-statement-on-conflict-and-food-insecurity.php>>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

occurred or was imminent in those contexts.<sup>202</sup> Starting in 2026, the co-focal points have also convened monthly expert meetings on situations on the Council’s agenda that FAO and WFP have identified as “hunger hotspots”. In their most recent outlook report, covering the period from November 2025 to May 2026, FAO and WFP identified 16 hotspots, of which 14 were affected by conflict.<sup>203</sup> Of these, ten were on the Council’s agenda.<sup>204</sup> Regular consideration of these situations could help promote and inform earlier action.

While most Council members agree that conflict is a primary driver of food insecurity and emphasise the importance of compliance with IHL—particularly the prohibition of starvation as a method of warfare—divisions persist regarding the Council’s role in addressing the issue. In addition to concerns about agenda expansion, views also differ on certain thematic linkages, especially the role of climate change in exacerbating conflict-induced food insecurity. Moreover, broader geopolitical tensions have shaped these discussions. Following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Council members diverged on the causes of rising global food prices, with Western members attributing them to the invasion and Russia pointing to the impact of sanctions. Divisions have also been evident in discussions on Gaza, where the issue has intersected with politically charged debates about humanitarian access, with the US questioning IPC famine findings and attributing food insecurity to the diversion of aid by Hamas. Similar dynamics may also apply to the humanitarian consequences of the Middle East crisis, as the conflict parties have accused each other of targeting civilian infrastructure and traded blame for the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>205</sup> This polarisation has contributed to the Council’s limited pursuit of accountability for starvation crimes and related IHL violations, constraining the use of tools such as sanctions and referrals, as previously discussed.

#### *ii. d. iii. Climate-related Impacts*

Climate change has increasingly been framed within the UN system as a factor shaping the protection environment in armed conflict, not as a direct cause of violence but as a set of pressures that can aggravate existing vulnerabilities. In this understanding, climate change operates as a “threat multiplier”, interacting with political, economic, and social fragilities to intensify risks to civilians. These pathways include the erosion of livelihoods, heightened competition over natural resources, displacement, and strain on already weak institutions. Empirical analysis underscores the extent of this overlap: an estimated 70 percent of the most climate-vulnerable countries are also among the most fragile,<sup>206</sup> while ten out of 12 countries that experience the greatest ecological threats are in conflict.<sup>207</sup> According to the Secretary-General’s 2025 PoC report, these climate-related pressures are already contributing to patterns of civilian harm in conflict settings, as recurrent climate shocks like floods and droughts severely impacted

conflict-affected countries such as Cameroon, Chad, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, and Syria, among others, straining limited resources and negatively impacting humanitarian conditions.<sup>208</sup>

The climate, peace and security agenda has gained traction within the UN Secretariat—including through the work of the inter-agency Climate Security Mechanism (CSM)—and among some member states, notably through initiatives such as the Group of Friends on Climate and Security, which is a coalition of over 70 countries that have highlighted the linkage between climate change and security and delivered joint statements at relevant Security Council debates. The agenda is contested within the broader UN membership, however, including the Council, where there has been persistent division between members who advocate for sustained attention to the security implications of climate change and those who caution against positing a direct link, arguing that climate change is primarily a development issue that is best addressed through other fora such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

This fault line has constrained the Council’s consideration of the issue. While the body has discussed climate security since 2007, it has only adopted one thematic product on it: a 2011 presidential statement that reaffirmed that the UNFCCC “is the key instrument for addressing climate change” but expressed concern that possible adverse effects of climate change may, in the long run, aggravate certain existing threats to international peace and security. In this regard, the text noted the importance of including conflict analysis and contextual information on the possible security implications of climate change in the Secretary-General’s reports, “when such issues are drivers of conflict, represent a challenge to the implementation of Council mandates or endanger the process of consolidation of peace”.<sup>209</sup> It did not mention the humanitarian impacts of climate change or its compounding effect on civilian harm in conflict settings.

The Council’s subsequent engagement on climate-related security risks has expanded over time but was negatively affected by the failure to adopt a thematic resolution on the issue in December 2021. An Irish–Nigerien draft resolution sought to establish a more systematic approach to climate and security within the Council’s work, including by requesting regular reporting from the Secretary-General on climate-related security risks and encouraging the integration of climate considerations into peace operations and conflict-prevention strategies. With regard to PoC, the draft recalled the obligations of all parties to armed conflict to comply with their obligations under IHL, “including those related to the natural environment”, and called on all states to comply with their respective obligations under IHL and IRL. The text also recognised that the adverse effects of climate change can “exacerbate the vulnerability of populations, especially those in situations of armed conflict, violence or fragility, whose

202 Security Council Report. “Sudan: Briefing under the ‘Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict’ Agenda Item”. (What’s in Blue, 4 January 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/01/sudan-briefing-under-the-protection-of-civilians-in-armed-conflict-agenda-item.php>>; Security Council Report. “Briefing on Risk of Famine in Northern Gaza”. (What’s in Blue, 11 November 2024), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/11/briefing-on-risk-of-famine-in-northern-gaza.php>>.

203 See e.g. FAO and WFP (12 November 2025). Hunger Hotspots: FAO-WFP Early Warnings on Acute Food Insecurity, November 2025 to May 2026 Outlook. These reports are separate from the joint updates that FAO and WFP submit to Council members.

204 These situations were Afghanistan, DRC, Gaza, Haiti, Mali, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Syria.

205 According to OCHA, the crisis has caused “the most significant global humanitarian supply chain disruptions since COVID-19 and the onset of the war in Ukraine”. OCHA (27 March 2026). Escalation in the Middle East and Beyond: The Humanitarian Response, <<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/iran-islamic-republic/escalation-middle-east-and-beyond-humanitarian-response-enar>>.

206 UNDP (1 September 2023). “What is Climate Security and Why is it Important?”, <<https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/what-climate-security-and-why-it-important>>.

207 Institute for Economics and Peace (October 2022). Ecological Threat Report 2022: Analysing Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace, p.2, <<https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ETR-2022-Web.pdf>>.

208 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (15 May 2025) (S/2025/271), [24].

209 Statement by the President of the Security Council (20 July 2011) (S/PRST/2011/15).

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

capacity to cope with climate shocks and changes is limited,” calling attention to the “humanitarian consequences of climate-related security risks for these populations”.<sup>210</sup>

The draft received support from a majority of Council members, and 113 co-sponsoring UN member states, but failed due to a veto by Russia, with India voting against and China abstaining. These members reiterated their position that climate change should be addressed in universal fora such as the UNFCCC and expressed concern about the potential securitisation of the issue.<sup>211</sup> As such, the outcome crystallised the fundamental division within the Council on this matter: not over whether climate change affects conflict dynamics and civilian vulnerabilities, but over whether and how it falls within the Council’s mandate to uphold international peace and security.

Subsequent Council practice has reflected both continued engagement and this underlying division. In August 2023, eleven Council members signed a “Statement of Joint Pledges Related to Climate, Peace and Security”, committing to use their terms and presidencies to advance discussion of the security implications of climate change. The pledging countries held a joint stakeout at the 2025 open debate on PoC, stressing that climate-related impacts continue to exacerbate the risk of conflict, trigger and prolong conflicts, and increase the vulnerability of civilians, especially women and girls, while placing additional strain on the capacities of state security forces and other actors such as UN peace operations. To address these overlapping challenges, the countries called for “comprehensive, conflict-sensitive strategies that strengthen community resilience, address the root causes of conflict, enhance adaptive capacity and the protection and assistance needs of the most vulnerable populations”.<sup>212</sup>

The Council has also held thematic debates on climate, peace and security that have highlighted protection concerns. These include a November 2025 open debate on the environmental impact of armed conflict convened by Sierra Leone;<sup>213</sup> a February 2024 open debate on climate change and food insecurity convened by Guyana;<sup>214</sup> and an October 2022 debate on climate and security in Africa convened by Gabon.<sup>215</sup> Across these meetings, briefers and most Council members converged in recognising that climate change and environmental degradation are closely intertwined with civilian harm, primarily by exacerbating food insecurity, displacement, and competition over natural resources in already fragile settings. Speakers consistently described climate change as a threat multiplier that intensifies underlying drivers of conflict and vulnerability, while also underscoring the reciprocal dynamic whereby conflict itself damages ecosystems, infrastructure, and livelihoods, further deepening risks to civilians.

Many members—particularly elected members and Western states—advocated for integrating climate-related risk analysis into the Council’s prevention, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding tools, including through early warning systems and climate-sensitive mandate design. At the same time, the discussions reflected enduring political divisions over the Council’s role, with some members reiterating the view that climate change is mainly a development issue that does not entail a direct causal link with armed conflict, even if it may generate instability. As such, the debates underscored the growing conceptual alignment on the relevance of the climate–PoC nexus without resolving how far the Council should operationalise this link in its practice.

These same dynamics have continued to impact Council negotiations since Russia’s veto of the Irish–Nigerien draft resolution. Members have incorporated climate language in select outcomes, albeit in carefully circumscribed ways, as discussions on thematic and country-specific products have revealed persistent sensitivities around such language.<sup>216</sup>

Negotiations on presidential statements on West Africa and the Sahel provide a particularly clear illustration of this pattern, while also drawing attention to the specific linkages between the climate security and PoC agendas. In 2016, the Council began a practice of adopting biannual presidential statements on this region. In its August 2021 statement, the Council recognised the adverse effects of climate change, ecological changes, and natural disasters on the region’s “security and stability”.<sup>217</sup> In 2022, negotiations on the subsequent statement broke down when Brazil, China, India, and Russia objected to this link and sought to strike the word “security” from the text. Most other members pushed to retain the agreed language, resulting in a two-year impasse in negotiations.<sup>218</sup> The compromise text finally agreed in May 2024 recognised “the adverse effects of climate change, ecological changes and natural disasters” and “their exacerbating effects on food security and on other humanitarian, social and economic challenges, which impact the security and stability of West Africa and the Sahel region”.<sup>219</sup> While this formulation maintained the reference to “security”, it was calibrated to reflect a less direct correlation with climate change compared to the August 2021 statement, mediating the relationship in part through the humanitarian consequences of climate change. The protracted negotiations and carefully worded outcome underscore both the persistence of divisions over climate-security language and the central role that PoC considerations play in this nexus.

Alongside these formal processes and products, the IEG on Climate, Peace and Security has emerged on the subsidiary level as an important mechanism for advancing the Council’s engagement

210 Draft UNSC Resolution (13 December 2021) (S/2021/990).

211 UNSC 8926th Meeting Record (13 December 2021) (S/PV.8926).

212 Letter dated 5 January 2026 from the Permanent Representatives of Denmark and Sierra Leone to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2026/15), p.7. The pledging countries were Denmark, France, Greece, Guyana, Panama, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Sierra Leone, Slovenia, and the UK.

213 UNSC 10035th Meeting Record (6 November 2025) (S/PV.10035).

214 UNSC 9547th Meeting Record (13 February 2024) (S/PV.9547).

215 UNSC 9150th Meeting Record (12 October 2022) (S/PV.9150).

216 See our previous reporting for examples, e.g., Security Council Report. “Iraq: Vote on UNAMI Mandate Renewal”. (What’s in Blue, 31 May 2024), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/05/iraq-vote-on-unami-mandate-renewal-4.php>>; Security Council Report “UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS): Vote on Mandate Renewal Resolution” (What’s in Blue, 7 May 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/05/un-mission-in-south-sudan-unmiss-vote-on-mandate-renewal-resolution-4.php>>; Security Council Report. “UN Interim Security Force for Abyei: Vote on Mandate Renewal Resolution”. (What’s in Blue, 13 November 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/11/un-interim-security-force-for-abyei-vote-on-mandate-renewal-resolution-4.php>>; Security Council Report. “Democratic Republic of the Congo: Vote on MONUSCO Mandate Renewal”. (What’s in Blue, 19 December 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/12/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-vote-on-monusco-mandate-renewal-3.php>>; Security Council Report. “Afghanistan: Vote on Draft Resolution Renewing UNAMA’s Mandate”. (What’s in Blue, 13 March 2026), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2026/03/afghanistan-vote-on-draft-resolution-renewing-unamas-mandate-3.php>>.

217 Statement by the President of the Security Council (17 August 2021) (S/PRST/2021/16).

218 Security Council Report. “West Africa and the Sahel: Presidential Statement” (What’s in Blue, 16 August 2021), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/08/presidential-statement-on-west-africa-and-the-sahel-2.php>>.

219 Statement by the President of the Security Council (24 May 2024) (S/PRST/2024/3).

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

on the issue. Established by Germany in 2020 to provide members with more systematic climate analysis, the IEG has convened regular expert-level meetings on both thematic and country-specific situations, including the DRC, Iraq, Mali, the Horn of Africa, and West Africa and the Sahel. In recent years, its activities have expanded to include field-based engagement. In December 2024, the IEG undertook its first field mission to Nigeria, focusing on the Lake Chad Basin, where members examined how climate change interacts with conflict dynamics, including through displacement, resource competition, and food insecurity, engaging with national authorities, regional organisations, and local communities.<sup>220</sup> A subsequent mission to Chad in December 2025 similarly highlighted the compounded effects of climate shocks, large-scale displacement, and intercommunal tensions, as well as the strain placed on governance structures and basic services in fragile settings.<sup>221</sup>

Overall, the Council's approach to climate-related security risks reflects a pattern of incremental engagement constrained by persistent political divisions. While there is broad recognition that climate change can exacerbate drivers of conflict and civilian harm, members remain divided over the appropriateness of treating it as a core security issue within the Council's mandate. As a result, the Council has developed a fragmented practice: sustained thematic discussion, informal member-driven initiatives to advance the agenda, and selective incorporation of climate-related language in country-specific contexts, but no agreed overarching framework to structure its engagement. This has allowed the issue to remain on the Council's agenda while limiting the extent to which climate-related risks have been systematically integrated into its PoC work.

#### *ii. d. iv. New Technologies*<sup>222</sup>

The rapid evolution of information and communications technologies (ICTs), AI, and other emerging technologies is reshaping contemporary armed conflict and creating new risks for civilians. Once largely confined to specialised military systems, these technologies are now deeply embedded in the everyday infrastructure and services on which civilian life depends—from communications networks and power grids to healthcare systems and financial services. This pervasiveness means that the effects of their use in conflict are rarely contained to the battlefield. Their dual-use nature and deep integration into civilian environments complicate the application of existing protection frameworks by further blurring the distinction between civilian and military domains, while also raising difficult questions about accountability and governance.

As highlighted in the Secretary-General's 2025 report—which for the first time contained a stand-alone section on new technologies—these dynamics are already evident in contemporary conflict,

presenting both opportunities and risks for civilian protection. While tools such as AI can support humanitarian objectives by improving analysis, anticipating displacement, and helping to mitigate harm, they are also being integrated into targeting and decision-making processes in ways that may increase risks to civilians, particularly given concerns about unpredictability and the erosion of meaningful human control.<sup>223</sup> The report further underscored that ICTs can cause significant civilian harm even without physical destruction by disrupting critical infrastructure, essential services, and data systems, while their speed and reach amplify these effects in cascading ways and increase civilian exposure to harm, including through digital participation in hostilities. Moreover, digital technologies accelerate the spread of harmful information that can fuel violence, polarise communities, distort information relied upon for safety, and undermine trust in humanitarian actors. Emerging technologies are thus reshaping both how harm is inflicted and the environments in which civilians seek protection, reinforcing the need for clearer application of IHL and stronger governance responses.

There is growing recognition that IHL applies to ICT activities conducted in the context of armed conflict, including cyber operations undertaken alongside or in support of kinetic military action. The 2014–2015 Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on developments in the field of ICT<sup>224</sup> noted established legal principles such as humanity, necessity, proportionality, and distinction in the context of the use of ICTs by states and elaborated a set of norms of responsible state behaviour in cyberspace, including a commitment by states to refrain from conducting ICT activities contrary to their obligations under international law, such as those that intentionally damage critical infrastructure.<sup>225</sup> The 2019–2021 GGE recognised the need for further study on how and when humanitarian principles apply, however, as did a 2024 resolution adopted by the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which reiterated that IHL rules and principles protect civilians in situations of armed conflict against the risks arising from ICT activities, while acknowledging that the specificities of the ICT environment continue to raise questions about how to apply those rules and principles in practice.<sup>226</sup> Doing so raises particular challenges, as civilian and military networks are often deeply interconnected, and military operations may rely on civilian infrastructure, complicating the identification of lawful targets and the assessment of incidental harm. In addition, unresolved legal questions—such as whether data constitutes an “object” under IHL—continue to generate debate. Despite these uncertainties, however, many states have emphasised that what the ICJ has called the “inherently humanitarian character” of IHL extends to all means and methods of warfare, including cyber operations.<sup>227</sup>

220 UN in Nigeria (12 December 2024). “UN Security Council Informal Group visits Nigeria, addresses Climate, Peace, and Security Challenges in Lake Chad Basin”, <<https://nigeria.un.org/en/285744-un-security-council-informal-group-visits-nigeria-addresses-climate-peace-and-security>>.

221 UN Climate Security Mechanism (17 December 2025). “UNSC Informal Expert Group Visits Chad to Address Climate, Peace and Security Challenges in Lake Chad Basin and Eastern Chad”, <<https://www.un.org/climatesecuritymechanism/en/news/unscl-informal-expert-group-visits-chad-address-climate-peace-and-security-challenges-lake-chad>>.

222 Portions of this section draw on the PoC chapter in our March 2026 research report on the Security Council's engagement on new and emerging technologies. See Security Council Report. Maintaining International Peace and Security in the Age of Rapid Technological Change: Is the Security Council Wired for Purpose?, Research Report no.2. (27 March 2026), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/research-reports/maintaining-international-peace-and-security-in-the-age-of-rapid-technological-change-is-the-security-council-wired-for-purpose.php>>.

223 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (15 May 2025) (S/2025/271), [45–49].

224 This group was first established by the General Assembly in 2004 to examine existing and potential threats in the ICT environment and possible cooperative measures to address them.

225 Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security (22 July 2015) (A/70/174).

226 ICRC (October 2024). Protecting Civilians and Other Protected Persons and Objects against the Potential Human Cost of ICT Activities during Armed Conflict. 34th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Geneva, Switzerland, <<https://www.icrc.org/en/article/resolution-protecting-civilians-objects-against-ict-activities-armed-conflict>>.

227 ICJ (8 July 1996). Advisory Opinion on the “Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons”, [86] <<https://www.icj-cij.org/case/95/advisory-opinions>>.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

In the Council, some members have argued that the PoC agenda should more explicitly encompass the risks posed by cyber activities and other technologies to civilian populations during armed conflict, particularly where attacks on critical infrastructure or disruptions to essential services may have cascading effects on civilians.<sup>228</sup> At the April 2021 open debate on critical civilian infrastructure, during which the Council adopted resolution 2573, several members—including Estonia, India, and Ireland—warned that cyberattacks against electricity, water, and healthcare systems could deprive large numbers of civilians of essential services and undermine humanitarian action, particularly in urban settings. Similar concerns later emerged in the June 2021 and June 2024 open debates on cyber threats, as well as in the November 2024 briefing on “threats posed by ransomware attacks against hospitals and other healthcare facilities and services”.<sup>229</sup>

Arria-formula meetings have provided opportunities for more focused discussion, with sessions convened in August 2020 and May 2023 examining cyberattacks against critical infrastructure and state responsibilities in response.<sup>230</sup> These discussions pointed to broad convergence around the need to protect critical infrastructure from malicious ICT activity, with several member states describing such attacks as a growing threat to international peace and security, and pointing to the normative framework of responsible state behaviour in cyberspace as central to these efforts.

Alongside cyber operations, advances in AI and autonomous systems are reshaping the conduct of hostilities in ways that carry significant implications for civilian protection. AI-enabled systems are increasingly used to support or automate functions such as target identification, surveillance, and decision-making, raising concerns about reliability, predictability, and the preservation of meaningful human control. The opacity of certain AI systems—particularly those relying on complex machine-learning models—can make it difficult to understand how targeting decisions are reached, complicating assessments of IHL compliance and the attribution of responsibility for violations.

The Secretary-General has repeatedly stated that machines with the power and discretion to take human lives without human control are politically unacceptable and morally repugnant and should be banned under international law.<sup>231</sup> In his *New Agenda for Peace* and subsequent reports, he has called on states to conclude by 2026 a legally binding instrument prohibiting autonomous weapons systems (AWS) that function without human control or oversight and cannot be used in compliance with IHL.<sup>232</sup> His 2024 report on lethal

autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) noted concerns from member states that such systems could have destabilising effects, lower the threshold for the use of force, and heighten escalation risks through their unpredictability, including through machine-to-machine interaction.<sup>233</sup> States also warned of the risk of an arms race and the danger of acquisition by non-state actors, including terrorist groups. Although some pointed to potential gains in precision and IHL compliance, the ICRC has cautioned that claims that new weapons will be more humane and precise have long accompanied the promotion of new military technologies but are not what has been seen historically.<sup>234</sup>

Developments in recent conflict situations appear to have perpetuated this pattern. In its March 2021 final report, the Panel of Experts (PoE) on Libya reported that, during the 2020 hostilities, retreating forces were “hunted down and remotely engaged” by uncrewed combat aerial vehicles or “lethal autonomous weapons systems”, and that such systems were “programmed to attack targets without requiring data connectivity between the operator and the munition”, amounting “in effect” to a “fire, forget and find” capability.<sup>235</sup> More recently, the Secretary-General as well as UN human rights experts have expressed alarm at Israel’s use of AI systems to assist in the selection of military targets in Gaza in a manner that has reportedly resulted in a high level of civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure and vital services.<sup>236</sup> LAWS have also shaped the war in Ukraine, where partially autonomous uncrewed ground vehicles (UGVs) have clashed “without humans being present at the site of the battle”,<sup>237</sup> driving what Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy described as “the most destructive arms race in human history” in his speech at the General Debate of the 80th General Assembly in 2025.<sup>238</sup>

While the Security Council has not yet held a meeting specifically dedicated to LAWS, the issue has surfaced in broader thematic discussions on AI. To date, the Council has held three formal meetings on the issue: briefings convened by the UK in July 2023 and the US in December 2024, and an open debate convened by the Republic of Korea (ROK) in September 2025. In the Council’s annual PoC debates, some Council members have also highlighted the risks associated with the misuse and potential weaponisation of emerging technologies, including AI, and underscored the need for human oversight in decision-making, arguing that responsibility and accountability should not be delegated to machines.<sup>239</sup> These interventions suggest growing awareness within the Council of the civilian protection implications of increasingly autonomous weapons systems.

228 UNSC 9662nd Meeting Record (20 June 2024) (S/PV.9662). See e.g. the statement by Costa Rica, emphasising that the protection of civilians’ agenda should be extended to encompass cyber-activities affecting civilian populations during armed conflicts.

229 UNSC 9779th Meeting Record (8 November 2024) (S/PV.9779). See also UN Security Council Meeting Press Release, “Ransomware Attacks on Healthcare Sector ‘Pose a Direct and Systemic Risk to Global Public Health and Security’, Executive Tells Security Council”. (8 November 2024) (SC/15891) <<https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15891.doc.htm>>.

230 In August 2020, Indonesia, in cooperation with Belgium, Estonia, Viet Nam, and the ICRC, convened an Arria-formula meeting on “Cyber-Attacks Against Critical Infrastructure”. In May 2023, Albania and the US, with co-sponsorship by Ecuador and Estonia, organised an Arria-formula meeting on “The Responsibility and Responsiveness of States to Cyberattacks on Critical Infrastructure”.

231 Secretary-General Statement and Messages. “Lethal Autonomous Weapon System ‘Politically Unacceptable, Morally Repugnant and Should Be Banned’, Secretary-General Says during Informal Consultations on Issue”. (12 May 2025) (SG/SM/22643) <<https://press.un.org/en/2025/sgsm22643.doc.htm>>.

232 UNODA. “Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems”, <<https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/emerging-challenges/lethal-autonomous-weapon-systems>>; Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace (June 2023) (EOSG/2023/9), p.27.

233 Report of the Secretary-General on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (1 July 2024) (A/79/88).

234 UNSC 10005th Meeting Record (25 September 2025) (S/PV.10005 [Resumption I]).

235 Letter dated 8 March 2021 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2021/229), [63].

236 OHCHR (15 April 2024). “Gaza: UN Experts Deplore Use of Purported AI to Commit ‘Domicide’ in Gaza, Call for Reparative Approach to Rebuilding”, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/gaza-un-experts-deplore-use-purported-ai-commit-domicide-gaza-call>>; UN Media (5 April 2024). “UN Gaza/Guterres”, <<https://media.un.org/avlibrary/en/asset/d319/d3193884>>.

237 Vitaly Shevchenko (7 March 2026). “Armed Robots Take to the Battlefield in Ukraine War”. BBC News, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62662gzlp8o>>.

238 President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (24 September 2025). Statement at the General Debate of the 80th United Nations General Assembly, New York, NY, <<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-pid-chas-zagalnih-debativ-generalnoyi-asam-100349>>.

239 UNSC 9921st Meeting Record (22 May 2025) (S/PV.9921). See e.g., the statements made by China and Denmark.

### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

The proliferation of UAS, including increasingly sophisticated and weaponised drones, further illustrates these challenges. Drones have become a defining feature of contemporary conflicts, offering relatively low-cost, adaptable platforms capable of conducting surveillance and delivering munitions with precision. However, their widespread availability and use by both state and non-state actors have expanded the battlespace and increased the frequency of attacks in populated areas, as seen in ongoing conflicts across Africa and the Middle East, as well as in Ukraine. Their integration with AI-enabled targeting systems may further accelerate decision-making processes, potentially reducing the time available to assess civilian risk and apply precautionary measures. At the same time, the use of loitering munitions and remotely operated systems can blur the line between direct and indirect participation in hostilities, complicating the application of IHL principles and accountability frameworks.

The Security Council's formal consideration of this issue has occurred mainly in the context of counterterrorism.<sup>240</sup> More recently, however, the Council has also begun to address the impact of UAS in other contexts directly related to the protection of civilians and UN and humanitarian personnel. In a 19 December 2025 press statement on Sudan, Council members condemned as a potential war crime a drone strike conducted by the RSF that hit a UN logistics base in Kadugli, killing six UN Interim Security Force in Abyei (UNISFA) peacekeepers and injuring eight more.<sup>241</sup> On 17 March 2026, Council members held closed consultations on the DRC following an 11 March drone attack in Goma that killed one UNICEF staff member and two other civilians. At that meeting, Council members apparently expressed concerns about the intensified use of drones and their consequences for the safety of civilians and humanitarian personnel, which some members linked to the involvement of foreign mercenaries in the conflict, highlighting the confluence of new technologies and alternative security providers in threatening humanitarian space.<sup>242</sup> Those interlinked issues have also emerged in other contexts, such as Haiti.<sup>243</sup>

Beyond their use in the conduct of hostilities, digital technologies have also transformed the information environment in which conflicts unfold. The spread of misinformation and disinformation, including through social media and other digital platforms, has emerged as a significant driver of civilian harm. False or manipulated information can incite violence, exacerbate intercommunal tensions, and contribute to the targeting of civilians. The Secretary-General's 2025 PoC report noted, for instance, that harmful information on social media in Sudan "exacerbated divisions and fuelled violence and the killing of dozens of people".<sup>244</sup> It also reported misinformation and disinformation campaigns targeting humanitarian organisations in Burkina

Faso, the DRC, Ethiopia, the OPT, and elsewhere, "further eroding trust in humanitarian actors, reducing operational effectiveness, and placing humanitarian personnel at risk".<sup>245</sup>

These concerns have also become more visible in the Council's own deliberations, where misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech have increasingly been treated not only as enablers of terrorism but also as broader drivers of conflict and threats to civilian protection and mission effectiveness. A notable development in this regard was the adoption of resolution 2686 of 14 June 2023 on "tolerance and international peace and security". Co-authored by the UAE and the UK, the resolution expressed concern at instances of violence fuelled by hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation, including through social media platforms, which it also recognised could contribute to the outbreak, escalation, and recurrence of conflict. It additionally condemned misinformation, disinformation, and incitement to violence against UN peacekeeping operations intended to undermine their safety and mandate implementation. The following year, resolution 2730 expressed concern about the increasing threat of disinformation and misinformation campaigns targeting UN and humanitarian personnel.

At the operational level, the Council has progressively integrated online information-related risks into the mandates of peacekeeping and special political missions. A presidential statement proposed by Brazil and adopted in July 2022 underscored the importance of strategic communications for effective mandate implementation and for responding to misinformation and disinformation affecting mission credibility, consent, and personnel safety.<sup>246</sup> This approach subsequently appeared across a range of mandates, including MONUSCO, UNIFIL, MINUSCA, UNISFA, and the UN Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH), which the Council tasked with enhancing strategic communications and countering disinformation, particularly where such campaigns undermine civilian protection, political processes, mandate implementation, or the safety of UN personnel.<sup>247</sup> In some cases, such as MONUSCO and MINUSMA, these tasks were linked explicitly to disengagement or withdrawal phases, in which misinformation and disinformation could heighten risks to civilians and UN staff.<sup>248</sup>

Despite Council members' widely shared concerns about this issue, it has recently become more politicised, as the US under the second Trump administration has repeatedly sought to delete references to misinformation and disinformation in Council products. Other members have opposed these attempts, resulting in compromise language in which the Council has instead referred to "false and falsified information". This shift was evident, for example, in resolution 2779 of 8 May 2025 on UNMISS, which called on parties to "refrain from spreading false and falsified information

240 Resolution 2370 of 2 August 2017 condemned the continued flow of weapons, including UAS and their components, to terrorist groups, while resolution 2617 of 30 December 2021 noted with concern the growing global misuse of UAS by terrorists to conduct attacks against restricted commercial and government infrastructure and public places. In December 2023, the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) adopted the Abu Dhabi Guiding Principles on the threats posed by the use of UAS for terrorist purposes, providing non-binding guidance on integrating UAS threats into national counterterrorism strategies and legal frameworks, improving awareness of UAS-related risks, developing measures to detect and respond to such threats, and strengthening capacity development and information exchange (S/2023/1035).

241 Security Council Press Statement on Drone Attacks on UNISFA Peacekeepers (19 December 2025) (SC/16259), <<https://press.un.org/en/2025/sc16259.doc.htm>>.

242 Security Council Report. "Great Lakes Region (DRC)". (April 2026 Monthly Forecast, 1 April 2026), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-04/great-lakes-region-drc-9.php>>.

243 Human Rights Watch (10 March 2026). "Haiti: Drone Strikes Put Residents at Risk", <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/03/10/haiti-drone-strikes-put-residents-at-risk>>.

244 Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (15 May 2025) (S/2025/271), [49].

245 *Ibid.*, [38].

246 Statement by the President of the Security Council (12 July 2022) (S/PRST/2022/5).

247 UNSC Resolution 2666 (20 December 2022) (S/RES/2666), [24(f)]; UNSC Resolution 2650 (31 August 2022) (S/RES/2650), [24]; UNSC Resolution 2659 (14 November 2022) (S/RES/2659), [32]; UNSC Resolution 2630 (12 May 2022) (S/RES/2630), [5]; UNSC Resolution 2743 (12 July 2024) (S/RES/2743), [1].

248 In connection with MINUSMA, UNSC Resolution 2690 (30 June 2023) (S/RES/2690), [6(vi)]; and, in connection with MONUSCO, UNSC Resolution 2717 (19 December 2023) (S/RES/2717), [27, 34(i) (f)]. The Council placed special emphasis on the protection of civilians and UN and humanitarian personnel in the context of the withdrawal of MINUSMA from Mali and of MONUSCO from South Kivu in the DRC.

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### III. Recent Trends & Challenges (2020 – present)

undermining UNMISS, including through social media”,<sup>249</sup> and in resolution 2802 of 14 November 2025 on UNISFA, which called for efforts to “promote information integrity and counter dissemination of false and falsified information”.<sup>250</sup> The same revision was also made in resolution 2808 of 19 December 2025 on MONUSCO, which encouraged joint efforts between the mission and host-state authorities to “counter false and falsified information campaigns aimed at undermining the mission’s credibility and hindering the implementation of its mandate”.<sup>251</sup>

Viewed in combination, new and emerging technologies have introduced civilian protection risks that cut across and compound the other dynamics examined in this section. Cyber operations and AI-enabled warfare intensify urban harm by targeting interconnected infrastructure; digital disruptions may impact supply chains and deepen conflict-induced hunger; and the speed and reach of misinformation amplify violence in already fragile settings. The applicability of IHL to ICT activities and the degree of meaningful human

control over increasingly autonomous targeting systems also remain contested—uncertainties that may intersect with broader attempts to selectively interpret and apply IHL more generally. Furthermore, while the three other issue areas examined in this report—accountability, humanitarian access, and peace operations—are governed by well-developed legal and normative frameworks that the Council routinely struggles to uphold, its approach to new technologies as well as several of the other cross-cutting threats studied in this section lacks even this theoretical scaffolding. Therefore, as new technologies continue to reshape both the conduct of hostilities and the environments in which civilians live—simultaneously interacting with the effects of urban warfare, food insecurity, climate change, and other threats—the challenge for the Council will be not only to keep pace with these developments, but to integrate them more proactively and systematically into its PoC framework in a manner that reflects their cross-cutting and compounding impacts on civilian harm.

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## IV. Recommendations

The recommendations set out below are addressed to Security Council members in their collective and individual capacities, including in their roles as penholders and elected members. They are informed by the analysis in the preceding chapters and by consultations with UN officials, diplomats, and civil society representatives conducted in the course of this report’s preparation. That analysis reveals not one but two distinct challenges. The first, which applies across most of the issues examined in this report, is a Council that has developed sophisticated and expansive institutional structures for the protection of civilians over more than 25 years yet has proven increasingly unable—and at times unwilling—to make use of those mechanisms in situations where they are most urgently needed. Here, the deficit is less one of agreed standards than of political will: a recurring failure to uphold legal obligations that member states have themselves affirmed, enforce decisions that conflict parties have violated, and act on reporting that the Secretariat has already provided. The second challenge, which applies particularly to several of the cross-cutting threats examined in the final section of Chapter III, is that the Council has not yet developed even the conceptual understanding that would make such enforcement possible—confronting civilian harms driven by new technologies, climate change, and urban warfare without the agreed frameworks that govern more established areas of its PoC work. The recommendations that follow address both challenges, though they do so in full awareness of the obstacles posed by great power rivalry, the proliferation of vetoes, and the broader erosion of multilateral cooperation that currently shapes the Council’s work. They are offered nonetheless in the conviction that naming gaps in practice, sustaining normative pressure, and identifying incremental pathways forward remain valuable—and necessary—even when transformative action appears out of reach.

#### i. Accountability

A core thesis of this report is that the fragmentation of the international system is intensifying geopolitical polarisation in a manner that is both fuelling armed conflict and blocking Security Council action, resulting in widespread impunity for breaches of international law that is accelerating civilian harm. As this report has highlighted, the Council’s accountability practice has contracted significantly over time, shifting from coercive judicial enforcement and ICC referrals to near-total paralysis outside underutilised sanctions regimes, preventing even declaratory references to accountability measures in Council products. The following recommendations seek to counter this trend and better equip the Council to promote a culture of compliance that protects civilians caught in conflict by imposing costs for violations of IHL and abuses of IHRL.

#### Recommendation 1: Adopt Shared Commitments on Accountability

Security Council members could consider launching a voluntary political initiative to mobilise the political will necessary to restore credible accountability for international crimes. Such an initiative could consist of adopting a “statement of shared commitments on accountability”, modelled on similar initiatives concerning the women, peace and security (WPS) and climate, peace and security agendas. These voluntary pledges would commit Council members to using their terms and presidencies to promote accountability for violations of IHL and abuses of IHRL, including by holding joint stake-outs on the issue of accountability prior to relevant country-specific meetings, focusing their national statements on the issue, bringing situations of widespread impunity to the Council’s attention, and inviting briefers with relevant expertise, such as representatives of independent fact-finding missions mandated by the General

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249 Security Council Report. “UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS): Vote on Mandate Renewal Resolution”. (What’s in Blue, 8 May 2025), <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/05/un-mission-in-south-sudan-unmiss-vote-on-mandate-renewal-resolution-4.php>>.

250 UNSC Resolution 2802 (14 November 2025) (S/RES/2802), [15].

251 UNSC Resolution 2808 (19 December 2025) (S/RES/2808), [29].

## IV. Recommendations

Assembly or the HRC. The pledges could additionally include a commitment to promote accountability language and advocate for concrete accountability measures in relevant Council products, including by following up on instances in which the Council has previously expressed its willingness to take further enforcement action in situations of concern.

### Recommendation 2: Further Operationalise Sanctions as an Enforcement Tool

Security Council members should mainstream and more consistently apply and communicate PoC-related designation criteria as grounds for listing in UN sanctions regimes. Given that available analysis suggests that PoC-related grounds are clearly invoked in only a fraction of current designations, Council members and sanctions committees should systematically consider and specify IHL violations—including the targeting of civilians, obstruction of humanitarian access, and the indiscriminate use of EWIPA—among the primary bases for listing individuals and entities in relevant regimes. The IEG on PoC and the Informal Working Group (IWG) on Sanctions—in collaboration with relevant PoEs—could jointly develop best practices to this end, including guidance on how evidence from UN monitoring, fact-finding missions, and Secretary-General reporting can support listing requests based on PoC-related designation criteria.

### Recommendation 3: Strengthen Engagement with the ICC and Other International Accountability Mechanisms

Although—or perhaps because—the ICC is one of the international community's strongest accountability mechanisms, the Security Council has become increasingly reluctant to engage with it in recent years. To demonstrate political backing for and strengthen institutional collaboration with the Court, supportive Council members could consider convening Arria-formula meetings and IIDs with ICC officials to exchange perspectives on situations of which both bodies are seized—not just the two cases that the Council has formally referred to the Court (Darfur and Libya). Doing so would maintain substantive engagement on accountability even absent consensus on new referrals or enforcement action. Council members should also resist efforts to strip references to international tribunals and other international accountability mechanisms from thematic and country-specific Council products, as the maintenance of agreed normative language on accountability in Council decisions preserves an important standard-setting role and signals to conflict parties that violations carry potential future costs even where political conditions presently prevent new enforcement action.

Additionally, members could support and engage constructively with external initiatives seeking to mobilise political support for accountability—including the ACT Group Code of Conduct, the Veto Initiative, the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to IHL, and the Hague Group—recognising that these mechanisms, while complementary rather than substitutes for Council action, help sustain international pressure for accountability in the current political environment.

### ii. Monitoring & Reporting

Since the inception of the PoC agenda in 1999, the Security Council has requested the Secretary-General to periodically update and brief members on a wide variety of topics, both in his thematic and country-specific reporting. This has generated voluminous analysis that members routinely fail to act on. While the present report has documented perceived gaps in certain reporting streams, most interlocutors emphasised in interviews that the primary reason for the Council's failure to respond effectively to contemporary protection crises is not a lack of available information but rather a deficit of political will. As such, many respondents considered the establishment of new reporting mandates for the Secretary-General to be a technical solution to what is fundamentally a political problem. The following recommendations therefore aim at productively redistributing the monitoring and reporting burden by requiring or encouraging member states to report on their own implementation of PoC-related commitments—and thereby also reinforcing efforts to promote accountability as outlined above.

### Recommendation 4: Require Member States to Report on Compliance with the Security Council's PoC Decisions

As IHL experts have observed, there is no mandatory reporting mechanism for parties to the main IHL treaties—namely the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols—as there is for the international human rights treaty system.<sup>252</sup> To enhance compliance with IHL in the absence of such a system, the Security Council could require UN member states to submit periodic reports on their implementation of the Council's binding PoC decisions. Such a system could be modelled on the Council's established counterterrorism practice by which the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) requests and reviews reports from member states on their national implementation of the Council's counterterrorism resolutions, using a risk and needs-based approach that results in variable review frequency. The Council could establish a designated expert body on the subsidiary level to review such reports on the implementation of Council-imposed PoC obligations, tasking it to synthesise findings and follow up with member states to address identified implementation gaps. The reporting requirement could begin with a narrow scope focused on one or a limited selection of key thematic resolutions before expanding to a broader framework.

### Recommendation 5: Encourage Member States to Submit Voluntary Reports on IHL Implementation

The counterterrorism obligations imposed by the Security Council on member states—including reporting to CTED—have been adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and therefore comprise a model that it is admittedly unrealistic to replicate in the current international environment. As an alternative, the Council could adopt a product inviting member states to submit voluntary reports on the domestic implementation of IHL, building on already established practice and guidance from the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.<sup>253</sup> The product could encourage states to develop the reports in line with agreed best practices—for instance

252 Giulio Bartolini (11 April 2024). "Voluntary Reports: A New Tool 'Toward a Universal Culture of Compliance with IHL'". ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog, <<https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2024/04/11/voluntary-reports-a-new-tool-toward-a-universal-culture-of-compliance-with-ihl/>>.

253 In 2019, the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent called upon states to "adopt necessary legislative, administrative and practical measures at the domestic level to implement IHL" and "to carry out, with the support of the National Society where possible, an analysis of the areas requiring further domestic implementation". It also invited states "to share examples of and exchange good practices of national implementation measures taken in accordance with IHL obligations as well as other measures that may go beyond States' IHL obligations". See 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. Resolution on "Bringing IHL Home: A roadmap for better national implementation of IHL" (December 2019) (33/C/19/R1), <[https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2019/12/33IC-R1-Bringing-IHL-home\\_CLEAN\\_ADOPTED\\_FINAL-171219.pdf](https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2019/12/33IC-R1-Bringing-IHL-home_CLEAN_ADOPTED_FINAL-171219.pdf)>.

## IV. Recommendations

periodic and public submission accompanied by national action plans to address implementation gaps—and consider modalities for providing technical assistance for this purpose to states with limited capacity. If sufficiently mainstreamed, the Council could request the Secretariat to analyse the reports to identify cross-cutting trends, challenges, and recommendations, which could inform the Secretary-General's annual PoC reports or be published as stand-alone analytical products. Alternatively or in addition, the reports could eventually serve as the basis of a voluntary peer review mechanism akin to the HRC's Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

### Recommendation 6: Use the IEG on PoC as an Expanded Forum for Implementation Dialogue

The co-chairs of the IEG on PoC could consider convening meetings on a monthly rather than ad hoc basis, creating more opportunities for discussion and allowing the group to expand its scope of activity. For instance, in addition to receiving analytical briefings, the IEG could consider inviting member states—including non-Council members in relevant situations—to brief the group on steps taken to implement the Council's PoC decisions. This would echo the way that CTED uses country dialogues to press states on counterterrorism implementation and would shift the IEG's dynamic from receiving information to pressing for action. To broaden the group's informational base, it should also consider convening, prior to its regular meetings, informal briefings with the NGO Working Group on PoC to receive civil society perspectives on the situation under discussion, including from local actors. Additionally, it should consider conducting field visits to relevant country situations, following the precedent set by the IEG on WPS and recently taken up by the IEG on Climate, Peace and Security.

### Recommendation 7: Systematically Track Implementation of Secretary-General Recommendations

Since 1999, the Secretary-General has submitted to the Security Council through both periodic and ad hoc reporting hundreds of recommendations on PoC-related actions to undertake.<sup>254</sup> To inform its mandates and reporting requests moving forward, the Council could request the Secretariat to collect and track implementation of all distinct recommendations contained in prior reports. Since those recommendations are predominantly addressed to member states, the Council could also encourage states to report on their implementation efforts, which would provide the informational basis for such an overview. Alternatively, the overview could draw on the member-state reporting generated by recommendations 4 and/or 5, if implemented. Further, supportive Council members could fund the incorporation of the overview into the Council's aide-mémoire on PoC issues, creating a living and comprehensive record of follow-through on Council commitments that could help guide further implementation efforts.

### iii. Humanitarian Access

Humanitarian access has become an increasingly politicised issue across situations on the Security Council's agenda, with fundamental disagreements over sovereignty and consent hampering efforts to

protect safe, rapid, and unimpeded humanitarian operations. At the same time, developments on the ground—including the instrumentalisation of aid delivery in Gaza and the collapse of cross-border mechanisms in Syria—illustrate the real-world costs of Council inaction. The following recommendations seek to reinforce the normative and legal framework on which principled humanitarian action relies and improve the Council's ability to respond when access is obstructed.

### Recommendation 8: Reaffirm and Defend Humanitarian Principles

The Security Council should reaffirm and consistently apply the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence as the framework governing the Council's approach to humanitarian access in all situations. Members should resist efforts to subordinate these principles to political considerations or to endorse aid delivery mechanisms that do not comply with established humanitarian standards. They should also consider non-military Chapter VII measures to safeguard principled humanitarian action in situations where armed conflict or unlawful restrictions on aid delivery degrade humanitarian conditions in a manner that threatens international or regional peace and stability. To focus attention on these issues, Council members should consider convening another high-level debate on humanitarian access, which could review trends, developments, and challenges in the five years since the signature event of France's July 2021 presidency, as well as take stock of the implementation of relevant resolutions.

### Recommendation 9: Mark the Tenth Anniversary of Resolution 2286

As part of efforts to reinforce the normative weight of humanitarian principles, the Security Council could adopt a product to mark the tenth anniversary of resolution 2286 on the protection of medical care in armed conflict, which the Council adopted on 3 May 2016. If the political climate is not conducive to a resolution that would materially build on resolution 2286 through stronger language or more operational provisions, the Council could consider a presidential statement simply recalling and reiterating its commitment to the principles outlined therein, building on the momentum of the Arria-formula meeting that Denmark, New Zealand, and Spain convened on 5 May 2026 to mark the anniversary.<sup>255</sup> Such a product could also request the Secretary-General to report on the implementation of the recommendations previously issued in accordance with the resolution.<sup>256</sup>

### Recommendation 10: Operationalise 2730 Framework

Per resolution 2730, the Secretary-General should swiftly notify the Security Council of widespread issues affecting the safety and security of humanitarian personnel, using transparent and consistent criteria as a reporting trigger. Upon receipt of such notifications, the Council should convene without delay and develop a coordinated response, treating such notifications as a genuine call to action rather

254 In 2019, the Secretary-General stated that all annual PoC reports submitted by then contained a total of "more than 200 recommendations, addressing such issues as conduct of hostilities, forced displacement, sexual violence, humanitarian access, engagement with non-State armed groups, accountability for violations, and the protection role of peacekeeping missions and regional organizations". Report of the Secretary-General on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (7 May 2019) (S/2019/373), [8].

255 Security Council Report. "Protection of Civilians: Arria-formula Meeting on the Protection of Medical Care in Armed Conflict". (What's in Blue, 4 May 2026). <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2026/05/protection-of-civilians-arria-formula-meeting-on-the-protection-of-medical-care-in-armed-conflict.php>>.

256 Letter dated 18 August 2016 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2016/722).

## IV. Recommendations

than as informational briefings. The response should include consideration of concrete measures, including sanctions, against individuals or entities responsible for attacks on humanitarian and UN personnel in violation of international law. As recommended by the Secretary-General, the Council should also systematically request concerned state authorities to conduct full, prompt, impartial, and transparent investigations into such incidents and to report regularly on their findings and on measures to prevent recurrence. Where states prove unable or unwilling to do so, the Council should consider establishing or using relevant existing international mechanisms to investigate alleged violations. Finally, the Council could encourage member states to endorse and implement the Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel, launched in September 2025 by a cross-regional group of countries to reinforce the 2730 framework.<sup>257</sup>

### Recommendation 11: Promote Humanitarian Carve-Out in Counterterrorism Frameworks

While resolution 2664 has set a positive global standard for the implementation of cross-cutting humanitarian exemptions in sanctions regimes, national counterterrorism frameworks that impose comparable obligations continue to hamper humanitarian action in some contexts. The Security Council could request a formal open briefing from OCHA and other affected actors on these challenges and consider issuing a product further clarifying international legal obligations in this regard, building on relevant provisions from prior counterterrorism decisions. These include resolution 2462 of 28 March 2019, which urged member states to take into account the potential effect of measures to counter the financing of terrorism on exclusively humanitarian activities.<sup>258</sup>

### iv. Peace Operations

The Council's operational protection architecture is contracting: several PKOs and SPMs have been terminated or drawn down under politically-driven circumstances rather than in response to improving conditions on the ground, while the UN's liquidity crisis has degraded the capacity of remaining operations. The shift toward non-UN deployments raises additional questions about PoC standards and accountability. The following recommendations seek to strengthen transitions, preserve protection commitments, and ensure that new modalities maintain established standards.

### Recommendation 12: Develop PoC Across the Full Continuum of Peace Operations

Pending the outcome of the Secretary-General's review of the future of peace operations, the Security Council could consider requesting the Secretary-General to issue further guidance on how the full continuum of peace operations—spanning PKOs, SPMs, and other field presences—can contribute to protection efforts, taking into account the mandates, resources, and other comparative advantages of respective configurations. This guidance—which could take the form of operational doctrine or a compendium of best practices—should respond to the call from the NGO Working Group on PoC to affirm protection “as a core aim across all forms of UN peace operations”.

### Recommendation 13: Prioritise PoC in Allocation of Mission Resources

With reference to resolution 1894, which stressed that the mandated protection activities of peacekeeping operations must be given priority in decisions about the use of available capacity and resources, the Security Council should ensure that the constrained resource environment facing UN peace operations does not erode their ability to protect civilians. This is not solely a concern in light of recent cuts, as continuing uncertainty over the full and timely payment of assessed contributions by certain member states could leave missions exposed to further reductions and to renewed cycles of contingency planning. Against that backdrop, the Council could request that any contingency measures—whether driven by the current liquidity crisis or by future shortfalls—be designed and implemented in a manner that minimises their detrimental impact on PoC mandate delivery. The Council could additionally consider requesting regular briefings from Secretariat officials and mission personnel on how budget cuts affect PoC-related tasks and on actions that the Council or individual members could take to alleviate these challenges.

### Recommendation 14: Implement the 2594 Framework for Transitions

The Security Council should enhance efforts to consistently and systematically apply the transition framework established by resolution 2594 in drawdown and mission closure decisions, ensuring or requesting that: (a) PoC benchmarks and host-state protection plans are developed well in advance of transitions; (b) protection-related tasks are treated as priority items during drawdown phases; (c) residual field presences are configured with sufficient capacity to support protection in the post-mission period, including through programmatic peacebuilding activities; and (d) the Council retains regular reporting on protection conditions after mission closure. As a general principle, members should resist politically driven drawdowns in contexts where civilian harm remains acute and host-state capacity to assume protection responsibilities is unverified. Where withdrawal of host-state consent makes continued deployment untenable, they should negotiate the most protective possible exit terms, including extended drawdown timelines, in-extremis response capacities, and robust handover to remaining UN presences.

### Recommendation 15: Require PoC Standards in Non-UN Deployments

When authorising non-UN deployments—whether ad hoc coalitions, AUPSOs, or other regional arrangements—the Council should include explicit, consistent, and enforceable PoC requirements in the authorising resolution, covering at minimum: mandatory integration of PoC into concept of operations and rules of engagement; requirements for dedicated protection capacities and advisers; transparency in command structures and force composition; and clear frameworks for monitoring, reporting, and accountability for harm to civilians. If and when applying resolution 2719 and its framework for UN-assessed contributions to AUPSOs, members should ensure that the prioritisation of PoC—which the resolution stipulates as a prerequisite for such funding—is rigorously defined, monitored, and enforced by all relevant stakeholders rather than treated as a

<sup>257</sup> The Declaration had been endorsed by 112 countries as at May 2026. <<https://protect-humanitarian-personnel.org/>>.

<sup>258</sup> UNSC Resolution 2462 (28 March 2019) (S/RES/2462), [24].

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## IV. Recommendations

formality. The Council should also reaffirm that the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) applies to all UN support to non-UN deployments.

### v. Cross-Cutting Threats

The evolving character of armed conflict has introduced a set of cross-cutting threats that both intensify risks to civilians and complicate the Security Council's response. These include the increasing urbanisation of warfare and the widespread use of EWIPA; the instrumentalisation of food as a weapon of war and the deepening nexus between armed conflict and hunger; the compounding effects of climate change on civilian vulnerability in fragile settings; and the rapid development and deployment of new and emerging technologies in ways that outpace existing protection frameworks. While these dynamics vary in their immediate manifestations, they share a common feature: they compound existing drivers of harm and interact with one another in ways that the Council's current thematic architecture does not adequately address. The following recommendations seek to advance the Council's engagement on each of these threats in a more coherent and integrated manner.

#### **Recommendation 16: Adopt a Thematic Product on Urban Warfare**

Urban warfare and EWIPA are now the leading drivers of civilian casualties in contemporary conflicts, but the Security Council has yet to pronounce itself on the issue in a formal thematic product following the suspension of negotiations on Norway's 2021 presidential statement. Council members could consider resuming those negotiations, seeking agreement on language that affirms the PoC framework in urban settings—including the IHL principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution—and condemns the indiscriminate use of EWIPA and siege tactics. The product could encourage states to endorse and implement the 2022 Political Declaration on EWIPA, which may serve as a reference point for agreed language and national commitments. In parallel, members should include explicit references to EWIPA in country-specific products on situations where explosive weapons are a leading cause of civilian harm, such as Gaza, Myanmar, Sudan, and Ukraine.

#### **Recommendation 17: Promote Early Warning & Early Action on Conflict & Hunger**

Despite resolution 2417's requirement that the Secretary-General report "swiftly" on conflict-induced food insecurity, white notes on certain situations of concern have reached the Security Council after crises have already emerged, prompting some members to criticise them as politicised and delayed. The Council could consider addressing this issue by formalising the submission of white notes as a regular, predictable reporting cycle—as proposed by the US under the Biden administration—or by mandating the Secretary-General to appoint a dedicated focal point on conflict and hunger to coordinate system-wide efforts. Recent practice has shown, however, that the Council already has other sources of information on which to act, including joint FAO/WFP reports and IPC findings. Further leveraging these sources, the Council should fully institutionalise the monthly expert meetings on hunger hotspots initiated in 2026 by the informal co-focal points on conflict and hunger (Bahrain and Denmark); treat IPC findings at a defined stage prior to famine as

a standing trigger for formal Council consideration; and—where deliberate obstruction of food access is documented—ensure that relevant sanctions committees are notified with a view to activating PoC-related designation criteria. Members should also resist the politicisation of IPC findings themselves, which risks undermining the independent evidentiary basis on which the Council's conflict and hunger framework depends.

#### **Recommendation 18: Systematically Integrate Climate-Related Risk Analysis into PoC Assessments**

Given that persistent divisions over the Security Council's role on climate, peace and security have blocked a comprehensive thematic framework on the issue, the most achievable pathway to consider the compounding impacts of climate change on the PoC agenda is to deepen country-specific integration of climate-related risk analysis in situations where climate pressures demonstrably amplify drivers of civilian harm—such as the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Horn of Africa. This does not require the Council to take a collective position on climate change as a security issue; country-specific PoC assessments can accommodate climate sensitivity without resolving the broader normative dispute. Options to this end include convening joint meetings of the IEGs on PoC and Climate, Peace and Security prior to the Council's consideration of situations with climate-related protection risks and explicitly mandating peace operations to monitor and report on climate-related drivers of displacement, resource competition, and food insecurity where these compound civilian harm in conflict settings.

More ambitiously, Council members could consider pursuing a thematic product that explicitly links climate-related pressures to the Council's PoC framework. Such a product need not assert a direct causal relationship between climate change and armed conflict or threats to international peace and stability, but could recognise, consistent with already agreed language in various country-specific products, that the adverse effects of climate change, ecological changes, and natural disasters can exacerbate vulnerability and compound civilian harm in conflict-affected settings, and call for the integration of climate-related risk considerations into the Council's PoC assessments and peace operation mandates where relevant. This would consolidate the conceptual alignment already expressed across multiple open debates without requiring members to reopen the failed 2021 thematic resolution negotiations. Joint meetings of the respective IEGs could serve as a consultation and negotiation forum for such a product.

#### **Recommendation 19: Integrate Technology-Related Threats into the Council's Existing PoC Work**

The Council's engagement on the civilian protection implications of cyber operations, AI-enabled targeting, autonomous weapons systems, and the weaponisation of the information environment remains episodic and has not translated into consistent practice. Rather than seeking consensus on how existing IHL applies to these technologies—an ambition that sits more appropriately within General Assembly-led processes—members should focus on systematic integration of these considerations into the Council's existing PoC work. This may include treating technology-related protection concerns as standing agenda items in IEG PoC briefings; convening thematic debates to further enhance

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## IV. Recommendations

conceptual understanding of the impact of emerging technologies on protection outcomes; and calling for formal meetings to address relevant incidents in country-specific situations—such as AI-assisted targeting with documented civilian casualties and drone attacks on UN and humanitarian personnel—in a focused, evidence-based format. As recommended in our separate report on the Security Council’s engagement on new technologies, the Council could establish an IEG on Technology, Peace and Security to help lend coherence to these efforts.<sup>259</sup>

### **Recommendation 20: Adopt a Thematic Product on the Protection of Displaced Persons in Armed Conflict**

The confluence of proliferating armed conflict, IHL violations, and

cross-cutting civilian harms examined in this report has driven the number of people displaced by violence to record levels. Although the Security Council has adopted several thematic outcomes touching on this issue and routinely refers to it in country-specific decisions, it has not yet adopted a stand-alone product addressing the matter. Council members should therefore consider the adoption of such a product—either as a resolution or a presidential statement—to provide more comprehensive and consistent guidance to member states on the protection of displaced persons in armed conflict, including the facilitation of durable solutions for the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of IDPs and refugees; their local integration, or resettlement; and the resolution of housing, land, and property issues.

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## V. Conclusion

When Vieira de Mello lamented the “atrocious” casualty rate among humanitarian personnel in his January 1999 statement to the Security Council, 33 aid workers had been killed the preceding year.<sup>260</sup> In August 2003, he and nearly two dozen others died in the Canal Hotel bombing in Baghdad, which targeted the newly established UN mission in Iraq, bringing the total number of aid workers killed that year to 87. That attack is what prompted the Security Council to adopt resolution 1502 as its first thematic product on the protection of humanitarian and UN personnel—an early decision through which it elaborated the PoC agenda that it had begun institutionalising with the adoption of resolution 1265 shortly after Vieira de Mello’s 1999 briefing.

Since then, the Council has adopted two additional resolutions on the issue—resolutions 2175 and 2730—developing a cumulative framework that has progressively expanded in both scope and operational detail. The resolutions have condemned attacks against humanitarian and UN personnel, affirmed that their deliberate targeting may constitute a war crime under international law, called on conflict parties to comply with their IHL obligations and on states to ensure accountability through domestic and international legal frameworks, and requested the Secretary-General to address and report on the issue through a variety of means.

Nonetheless, an average of 126 aid workers were killed annually between 2020 and 2022. Between 2023 and 2025, the average rose to 339. As current Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Tom Fletcher stated at the Security Council’s most recent briefing on the implementation of resolution 2730 in April 2026, this increase “is not an accidental escalation” but rather represents “the collapse of protection”.<sup>261</sup> Since this is a collapse that has occurred alongside and in spite of the robust normative and institutional doctrine that the Council has continued to develop, it serves to illustrate the core dynamic examined in this report, which is the persistent and still-growing gap between the protections to

which civilians in armed conflict are legally entitled and the brutalising and often illegal harms to which they are routinely subjected in practice. As such, the observation that Vieira de Mello made in his 1999 statement is equally true today: “the gulf between existing international norms and respect for them on the ground has probably never been so wide”. Indeed, at the April 2026 briefing, Council members maintained this rhetoric that has marked the PoC agenda from its inception 27 years ago, as Panama warned of “a widening gap between the commitments made and their implementation on the ground”, and the DRC stressed the need to “bridge the gap between the decisions made by the Council and the reality experienced by affected populations”.<sup>262</sup>

The broader record examined in this report suggests that this gap is no longer best understood simply as one between principle and practice. It is also a gap between the Council’s accumulated knowledge and its willingness to act on that knowledge; between the sophistication of the majority of its thematic architecture and the inconsistency of its country-specific responses; and between the frequency with which it meets on protection crises and its diminishing readiness to impose consequences when its own decisions are ignored. In this sense, although the Council’s PoC engagement does remain underdefined in certain areas, the problem confronting the agenda today is not primarily conceptual. The Council has at its disposal a substantial and versatile body of legal norms, institutional tools, reporting streams, and operational experience. What has become increasingly scarce is the political cohesion and resolve needed to use those assets consistently in defence of civilians, particularly where major power interests are engaged or where conflict parties benefit from diplomatic cover.

Yet the report also suggests that the erosion of effective civilian protection should not be mistaken for the irrelevance of the agenda itself. On the contrary, the worsening protection environment makes the PoC framework more necessary, not less: as a source of legal

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259 Security Council Report. Maintaining International Peace and Security in the Age of Rapid Technological Change: Is the Security Council Wired for Purpose?, Research Report no.2, p.35.

260 All casualty figures in this section are based on data from the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD) <<https://www.aidworkersecurity.org>>.

261 UNSC 10131st Meeting Record (8 April 2026) (S/PV.10131). Fletcher specified that 560 of the 1,010 deaths recorded between 2023 and 2025 occurred in Gaza and the West Bank, 130 in Sudan, 60 in South Sudan and 25 each in Ukraine and the DRC.

262 Ibid.

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## V. Conclusion

clarity, as a standard against which state and Council conduct can be judged, and as a basis for contesting the normalisation of civilian harm—including in emerging domains where the Council’s normative framework itself remains incomplete. The central question, therefore, is not whether the Council still recognises the importance of protecting civilians, but whether members are prepared to defend that commitment when doing so carries political cost. The answer to that question will do much to determine whether PoC remains a meaningful organising framework for Council action or endures mainly as the vocabulary through which the international community describes its ongoing failure “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”.<sup>263</sup>

The recommendations set out in the preceding chapter are addressed to Council members who are operating under severe constraints that this report does not minimise. Some of them are achievable in the near term; others represent aspirations that require a political environment that does not currently exist. What the report does argue is that the response to the current environment cannot be resignation. The Council has tools it is not using, norms it is not upholding, laws it is not enforcing, and reporting it is not heeding. The gap between what the Council has agreed and what it does is itself a political choice—and one that can, incrementally, be made differently. Two-and-a-half decades after the adoption of resolution 1265, the civilians bearing the consequences of that gap deserve nothing less than the full weight of the Council’s attention and the most creative use of the political potential that it retains as the body entrusted with the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.

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263 Charter of the United Nations (26 June 1945), Preamble.